

# Up Jumped the Apparatus

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We don't become another being, we turn into another thing, a dense mineral composed of infinitely multiplying interior edges whose inspection and documentation constitute the very reason for our survival in time.

- Alvaro Mutis

After resting for a time in the village, the *angakok* pursued his journey, reached the Milky Way, followed it for a long time, and finally came down to his own grave. When he re-entered his body, it came back to life, and, leaving the graveyard, he went to his village and narrated his adventures.

- Mircea Eliade

The guests are scattered through the land  
(For the eye altering, alters all);  
The senses roll themselves in fear,  
And the flat Earth becomes a ball, (...)

- Blake





## Part One: Shorter Works



*Where We Saw Them Last* (Lily Press, 2007)

Coda

Someone told me the stars are drunk,  
the distance between them so pointless  
as to make them behave erratically.  
But this is a mistake, an idea  
that assumes empty space is empty.

Once, I was on a boat, and the ocean  
was an ocean of noise,  
a place where one yearns for the bottle.  
The squid and the albatross eyed me.  
Their patience turned day into night.

I have some books. Paperbacks mostly.  
They try to teach me lessons.  
Sometimes I catch from them a silence  
too stubborn to overcome.  
Sometimes I get depressed and drink too much.

Tonight, the wine is made of light  
and a seed without taste or purpose.  
A seed with nothing in it. The wine  
has a name that I forget, though I know  
it means starvation in another language.

There is no label, just the bottle  
and a cork the color of a pleasant evening.  
I pour the wine into a bowl made of clay,  
a bowl I found when looking for bowls.  
The wine has no color and so is colored

by the clay. It tastes like the things  
I say concerning happenstance and love.  
Soon my mouth knows every detail  
in a liquid neither sweet nor unpleasant.  
And I grow tired of admitting guilt,

of repeating myself shamelessly,  
but the wine gives me a kind of language  
I know I shouldn't waste. Words  
for the way an empty bottle falls asleep.  
Words that mean we need more words.

Aubade

*for Carly*

1.

Our first night together  
you were afraid of morning.  
That's only natural.  
Light changes everything.  
We went to the pool hall  
and spoke about the past.  
Yours was like a book,  
full of surprise endings.  
Look at the moon, you said,  
outside where we shivered.  
The moon changed colors.  
It followed us around.

2.

This morning, you dress  
for work and I think you  
magnificent, as is my habit.  
Tristan and Isolt sang an aubade  
because morning did not  
belong to them. We're rich.  
The moon is ours to keep,  
even when half-carved, dim,  
besieged by morning light.  
This song fears nothing.  
We own both moon and sun.

#### Concerning Life on the Island

It is time again for the crustaceans. The crabs in particular  
who rise from the ocean as if they were invited.  
The religion of the crabs is Presbyterian, their motives  
unknown, their methods crude. A woman scolds her child  
for naming the crabs, for accepting them into the family.  
The child imagines a world where the sun tastes  
something like fish. The woman thinks the crabs' pincers  
are decoys, their bodies an exercise in obscenity.  
The poetry of the crabs is the heroic couplet. A man  
invents local history. He imagines linguists, fishermen,  
and kings.  
The crabs help themselves to the meat in his freezer.  
They make themselves beautiful. The eyes of the crabs  
are historical monuments, their philosophy a denial  
of light.

## Argentina

A woman gets perfume in her eyes and is blinded  
momentarily, a victim of her own enchantment.  
She strokes the leaves of the hibiscus on the table  
beside her,

waits for the darkness to fall apart like physics.  
The radio warns of tainted meat, gives the details  
of a flood, and suddenly she remembers a snake

she saw once in the cane-brake, raspberry-striped  
and famished, too old for rejuvenation.  
She killed it with a shovel, hung the heavy flesh

above the door. That night a man stopped by.  
He was fierce, haunted by the carcass  
and anxious to start over. They drove to the trestle

and watched the children risk their lives.  
The man took a picture of the salt moon and bit her finger.  
He said when you forget me, this will go away.

## Concerning Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation

A woman works for an insurance firm  
that no longer covers it,  
no longer pays claims  
for enhancing what little pleasure we have  
with a rope.  
Part of her job is to explain the term  
to anyone who calls in.

But there are certain words  
she is not allowed to use:  
Masturbation. Strangle. Self.  
The boss doesn't like them,  
says you went to college,  
make something up.  
So she tells people to imagine  
the colors in broken glass,  
the way entire lives move  
within a breath or two.  
She makes them dizzy  
with equivocation,  
with bird sounds that go on and on.  
Says see? They don't.  
They try to pin her down  
over the phone,  
but she wanders off.  
She looks for certain words  
of her own.  
Breath and Love.  
Static.

### The Flood

The flood was an occasion for coarse language.  
The boy knew to drown was to lie among  
onions and mud, to endure the lamentations  
of the fence post. Grown men passed ecstatic,  
refusing to sink. The radio tower was the last to fall,  
brought down by people with nothing to say.  
Eyes shone like stars in the deepest water.  
Debates raged concerning the ownership of horses.  
The renewal of fortunes.

## The Prophet

You are minding your own business.  
The movies, a wedding, a class  
in economics. It doesn't matter.  
You are sober and satisfied.  
Suddenly, you want to stand up  
and say fuck fifteen times.  
The impulse is as pointless and real  
as any vision. You are the prophet  
with live coals on his lips.  
You manage to stay in your chair,  
let the movie out, the wedding be,  
but you know your life is over.  
You feel the urge to tell your wife  
the babysitter looks damned attractive.  
You almost shoot the neighbor's dog.  
There is no place to go, no big fish  
to hide in. God, in His infinite sense  
of humor, has singled you out.  
How close control is to something else.  
You want to steal a bowling ball.  
No one would get the point.  
The prophet's biggest problem is  
God can be a little cryptic.  
Throw food in a restaurant,  
call your boss an ugly drunk  
and you are only crazy, no use at all.  
So you stand around in silence.  
People pass you on the street  
and smile. You want to make bird noises.  
You want to sit down in traffic,  
warn them how thin the line  
between living and lost control.  
Between normal days and captivity.



## The Radio

My days are like familiar songs.  
The mean things I say to friends.  
The stoplight that makes me wait.  
I know every word by heart.

I know there are no words.  
I will have the special for lunch.  
A woman will look at me twice.  
A radio plays too low to hear

over the noise of sitting still,  
the sound of breathing.  
I've heard these songs before, though.  
They celebrate the dead.

## Song

I don't mind the obvious.  
The steps made of broken wood.

The long, wet patches of sand.  
Who knows how many times

I followed water when I was lost.  
The other day I watched the sky

and a cypress tree stand still.  
Some of my enemies were there.

I couldn't miss the opportunity.  
The steps don't lead up or down,

but the last time I looked,  
the sand seemed dry as if

I invented the whole thing.  
Tomorrow, I unearth the flowers.

### The Method

You leave the house, walk streets  
that seem designed now in their absence  
of design. Maybe you've had a fight  
with someone you thought you knew better.

Maybe your bathtub has grown too familiar.  
The dust in the air, the fact  
of pine trees in the morning light,  
your own hands taking up space

on either side of your body. These things  
make you want to know something  
you hadn't known before.  
How the sidewalk stays straight.

Why store windows don't just fall out.  
The sun grows fat and high, the traffic  
flies by as if you were less than the idea  
of someone walking down the street.

This, of course, makes you uncomfortable.  
So you find a place with good blueberry pie  
and you imagine yourself the subject  
of some vast and remarkable experiment.

The kind that determines what isn't there  
based on what is.

The scientists are all people you know.  
An uncle. The first person you slept with.

The last. The neighbor whose dog  
whines itself to sleep. Your children.  
They ask you questions in a language  
you can't figure out, but their voices

make you see. A childhood raising chickens.  
The tattoo you got for Christmas.  
Your life as a diver at the bottom of the sea.  
Visions so vivid as to make them real.

This is science. You understand everything.  
Suffering and death, the nature and limits  
of space, perfection and greed,  
the meaning behind the mole on your cheek.

All is simple and obvious. Then it is gone.  
The scientists take off their coats  
and disappear. The traffic continues.  
You pay the waitress and head back home.

You take a route that seems familiar now.  
The broken windows and the bait store.  
The people in their yards.  
The streets named after trees.

## Where We Saw Them Last

I'm sorry I haven't written but the days seem  
more like accidents than anything we might have  
agreed to.

I talked to the woman with the scars above her eyes.  
She told me you moved to Rhode Island to sing.  
I never knew you wanted to be famous.  
God, that woman is ugly. The scars float above her eyes  
like pelicans. I don't even know where Rhode Island is.  
Last year I was in a lot of trouble. I saw my father  
on the neighbor's roof and he was speaking to me directly.  
His words were so real, they weren't words at all,  
but a bunch of scrawny crows.

## Fragment, with Dice

The gambler dreams of onions  
painted gray and sitting on a shelf  
by the window. When opened,  
instead of layers, they reveal a core  
of nothing. He avoids the tables  
for a week or two until he breaks  
a lamp and then it's usual business.  
On the train, people tell him stories.  
A woman with elaborately-trussed hair  
claims she dives with manta rays.  
The animals rise and touch her skin.  
An old man says his leg is made  
mostly of plastic. He has twenty  
grandkids and a mistress in Detroit.  
These people are going home.  
They speak as though life has been  
an unmitigated delight and for this  
he almost loves them.

*Furiant, Not Polka* (Moria, 2008)

Furiant, Not Polka

I stack the driftwood in the corner and search my pockets for the pipe I dreamt once I smoked, but which has never since materialized, hard as I might try to find it. Things like this ache beneath the skin. But only for a moment. And then it is time to replace them with duct tape and VCRs and those skinny fish that bite when you are careless taking them off the hook. Sometimes, the mattress begins to look like a barrel organ. Or the monkey that goes with it. That lights its own cigars and makes hand gestures that mean one thing in the Piedmont. And something else entirely in New Orleans. I notice the area between lakes has always been a favorite haunt of men who have no clear idea of what it means to be men. Who suspect it has something to do with the way you pronounce your words. Or which words you choose in the first place. Such as “skein”. And “rabbit”. And that variation on the verb form that makes it some other part of speech. Or confuses your auditor if he is standing more than a mile away. This is the point at which the self tends to go on vacation. It leaves the cleaning-up to its friends and neighbors. To those who love the self, but worry about it because of the way it behaves. Take, for instance,

that man who locks himself in his shed, trying to create his own language, trying to fashion it ex nihilo the way you might invent a mouse trap on a planet where there are no rodents. Not even nutria. He makes use of letters and commas and poison. But mostly he relies on rubber bands. And those pictograms that look suspiciously like skeletons in houses.

#### Man with a Tri-Cornered Hat

This is the terror that keeps you awake. The sense that it doesn't matter what you do, someone is always going to get there first. Before you can manage to untie your harness. Before the gates close and the fishing tournament is cancelled due to lack of community involvement. Are you justified in worrying so, given the catfish have all shrunk down to the size of seed packets? And their reproductive rates have slowed to the point even those who study them are not sure anymore just what reproduction is supposed to look like, what it must accomplish. Oh sure, we know in the abstract, and we root for it the way you might root for the team that hasn't won a game in years. But that doesn't change the fact that the theories all begin to sound like diseases of the mind. Speculation of the kind caused by

someone eating lead paint as a child. But what should we take with us that hasn't already gone before? That hasn't soaked up the last enzyme or pocketed the compass that led us to this point and no further? Like those birds hatched from eggs covered on the outside with designs that remind one of Maori tattoos. Or the crest of the waves when the moon has come in too close and stirred the sea up. Out of jealousy, I suppose. Because it is too far away and wishes to be in on the secrets. The same way your secretary knows who's been in your office. Why she left in tears.

#### On the Dust Jackets of Even the Filthiest Books

But why must they drag it all out? These lessons in the alphabet. How to stand on your own, like a statue of Napoleon, even when the wind has decided to undo its good works in Denmark. On the island of Java. You know the story. The twenty-five different families all competing for the same space above the butcher's shop. The cabal of local magistrates and educators financing the operation on the backs of the very people who decided to undertake it. Who found themselves adrift in the sort of tub made famous in nursery rhymes. On the dust jackets of even the filthiest books. Mark well, though, the taboos with your highlighter.

Set them aside as a reminder of what you've been neglecting. At least when the tattooed woman is in town. She doesn't seem quite the same. As if a skull had been moved laterally across her belly. As if there had been three canaries at the shoulder blade and now there are only two. But they are nonetheless impressive for all that, harboring (you can tell) resentment and lust in equal proportions. Like sailors let loose on those who scuttled their johnboats. Or those women who tell you one thing Thursday, then repeat it the following week. But with the light in their eyes missing, so that you know they have accepted someone else's version of events. They have already defected.

#### What the New Caledonian Said

And maybe you are surprised by the enormity of your emotions. By your tendency to grasp at un-tuned harps. As if they were made out of some rare compound. Some exotic metal so valuable it causes an upsurge in suicide just as soon as it hits the market. Does this mean you will no longer recognize yourself in the pages of the encyclopedia? In the water color portraits painted by the woman who sits in the window? Who looks out at the street below as though at some preternatural ice age? Or is it all made so utterly



simple in the end, we pass over it with barely a nod? With barely a cyst under the skin to remind us of what we have been doing so long without. I am of the mind that the regicides and alimony bring us back to the restive condition. That place where we are so completely surrounded by our element, we start to consider it alien simply because we no longer recognize it. Because the nerve fibers are made bare through a process of twisting. Of asking the wrong questions. And then sticking around for the veal. No matter how hard you try to avoid it, the days liquefy. The image of the beloved's body, frail as a vase, and yet somehow daunting, magnificent, fails to stick around. It too becomes a shadow of itself. And then something almost impossible to describe. Just as though it never really existed in the first place. And if you are to retain it in even this most rudimentary form, you will have to accept it is at least seventy-five percent your invention. But what does this mean for the mind that invented it? Why should it be aggrieved? And where is the utility in grief, that thing that makes it stick around despite its drawbacks, like weeds? Like the vestigial digits in the wings of a bat?

## His Vipers, He Writes

We've come to expect disillusion and madness where before there had been simply chiffon. That material you might remember from the early novels of Auchincloss. But enough of the ad hominem attacks! We've become so devoted to them, the sailors themselves run the other way at our approach. And I suspect there are days when we so thoroughly lose that sense of being someone in particular that if you were to quiz us, we'd pass, but only by chewing on the paper. By reworking the questions in the meantime to reflect the slant of the other people in the room. Thereby enabling our escape through the kitchen. Through the back passages ordinarily reserved for tornado drills. But not the real thing. Does this mean we are somehow less than we were this morning? When the ceiling fan seemed strangely geometrical, part of the problem? When the coupons were still good through May? Probably. But that doesn't make for a pleasant denouement, by any means. There is the requirement still of fumbling. Of packing away the figurines and the mortar and pestle handed down by your grandmother. And then, that nearly unconquerable longing for people we do not know.

## Concerning the Origins of Despair

Whatever's at the root should remain constant. Its precise identity, though, isn't that important. Ask the man who cleans the office windows. Who hangs above the street like an idea in someone's head. He knows the balloons used to represent thought in comic books are designed merely to take up space. To allow their creator to get paid a full day's wage without having to engage in a full day's illustration. You may insert the learned commentary here. We won't wait for it to accumulate. Imagine how destructive it all must be for those who spend the majority of their time in one place. Like New Mexico. Rather than, say, traveling to Azerbaijan and then elsewhere because they are restless. Of course, waiting around for the family to catch up with you, for the children to appear seemingly from out of nowhere like butterflies, remains the single best method of conquering despair. Unfortunately, it also insures you won't be taken seriously by anyone who has discovered some new property of light. Who has recorded the behavior of gibbons in the deepest jungle. But should we concern ourselves with the opinions of people who pay that much attention to everything? Who keep their eyes forever open like statues? And wander the earth with the help of government grants and their collective memory of the magi? Probably it's best

to forget everything you've ever heard concerning the symptoms of despair. And, more to the point, the origins. It is not an ailment that lends itself to analysis. It's not composed of component parts like a blanket which you have merely to un-stitch to see how it was made. It is, however -- as everyone knows -- something with the potential to grow unwieldy. To travel from one valley to the next, grinding everything before it to dust. The highways. The rivers. Even the library. Where we keep our topographical maps. The complete Dostoevsky.

#### The First Whence and the Last Whither

Your first instinct might be to go back over the correspondence. To see if you can pinpoint where exactly things turned sour. Maybe secure a foothold in that future that isn't real or even probable, but simply invented for the purpose of making us feel at home when we are no longer at home. When we are rushing headlong into territory that has been abandoned even by the cannibals. That has lost its identity by virtue of the bland things that occur there. If we wish to remain, the climate will make that decision difficult, but it won't be the sun or the wind or the rain, or even all of them together, joined in conspiracy like the Masons or

those children who have a beef with strangers in a Mishima novel. It will be the interval in between. Those miniscule stretches of time when there is no dominant pattern, no temperature, no moisture. No movement of the air of the sort that makes, in a separate context, the noise we recognize as a flute concerto. We capture it on disc and give it to relatives when they decide to stop chasing attractive members of the opposite sex. They devote themselves instead to the arranging of their living rooms, the making and transportation of pasta salad on those Mondays when they don't have to go to work because someone decided to make a holiday, and who are we to complain? Who are we to suggest the warm, wet snap that lasted ten thousand years wasn't the reason the Natufian people enjoyed themselves so thoroughly on the forest steppes, boring holes in beads and gnawing on antelope bones? All of which just goes to show you must work when you have darkness too. Otherwise, you'll begin to wonder if you haven't done everything wrong. From the planks laid one after another across the shallows so the ladies can exit the boats without getting wet. To the sounds you make in your throat when the experience borders on the unendurable. Something so intense, the right to experience it is bound up with the right to forget it ever happened. And yet, we habitually pull at

the seams that separate the one from the other. Until it all comes loose in our hands. And then where are we? Not back where we started, exactly. But not far from it, really. If you believe what they're saying in Iquitos.

#### An Enquiry Concerning the Yodeling Knives

Avoid lists, especially those involving African deities and the painters who found them irresistible. The kind of thing that wakes you up at night when you weren't even really sleeping, that startles you down to the very spleen and gets you to making pancakes, just in case someone else has had a similar experience. You can pull catfish from the river with your bare hands, but this is not something you'll want advertised. Because there are some who will admire you for the dedication involved. For the fearless manner in which you sacrifice your body. You can see where the dilemma lies, like a python. Not in the weeds, necessarily, but in the domestic equivalent. In the space between the armchair and the curtains where almost anything is apt to lurk. And you don't have to step on it to cause the tragedy. You just have to be in the right mood. A stream, for instance, after an earthquake, may be expected to reverse its flow. But it is still recognizably a stream. This is why it's best to write

your science fiction novels at great speed, and without going back to check your facts against the physics lectures of Richard Feynman. I won't go so far as to suggest such wisdom is infallible, but you might find something very similar in just about any drug store. In the back aisles, with their unguents and best-sellers. And the children huddled around that one birthday card that reveals too much about the way adults actually live their lives. With their clothes off half the time. And the other half spent huddled up in blankets. As if they are afraid the winter cold will chap their skin. And that the ukulele music on the radio is just something to occupy their minds while the world goes on without them.

#### Principal Landmarks of the Sidereal Evolution of the Globe

There's a reason we look the other way instinctively when someone familiar walks into our line of sight. Someone who we were as intimate with in the past as Pocahontas was with John Rolfe or Abelard was with sitting down. Would we still consider such illumination a good thing, just because it comes after the fact? Because it rings true only because it is true? I like to think the saddles are clean, the pages turned up at the edges even when we aren't there to perform these duties. Because if not, if I am mistaken, then

there is no end to the visions that will descend. They'll scatter about like silverfish, looking for the nearest avenue of escape. They are like the motorcycle when there were only donkeys on the road. Who's going to make such anachronism a crime! Who's going to limit it to the jailhouse where it will get written about by every literary genius who passes through? Where it will get turned eventually into the cause celebre of the decade, and then march across the continent like Hannibal? Or those weeds that originated in the labs of some South American country and escaped through the ventilation system, their spores so hardy you can't kill them with lye. Or radiation. Or the chants and spells one purchases from the witch doctor, who is not really a witch or a doctor, but a former medical student who couldn't adjust to holding severed limbs in his hands during the early coursework. He retains his fascination for hinges well past his eightieth birthday. Which is marked, as usual, with an almost total silence. A ring of admirers lighting candles outside the apartment and some of them trying to communicate with hand signals. Or comic books. Holding them open toward the window, pointing out relevant passages from a hundred yards away.



## A Uniformly Emotionless Performance

It's possible the pipeline that feeds the area oxygen has been compromised in some fashion. And what appears at first to be a mere wilting of the flowers is, in fact, the beginning of the end of all things. Not just those to be found within the confines of the project itself, but everywhere. Up the street. At the beach where the not-so-fashionable mingle with their very discriminating neighbors. And the moon comes in so close to the swing set, even the bats that cling to the cold cross bars seem upset. They whimper and whistle and begin to circle overhead in such an agitated state, you might almost suspect they can see the future. Our comeuppance, of course, comes up from the caves beneath the town. No one suspects he is living above a morality play. A sulfurous patch of cavern home to additional bats, and even the earwig. Which is a pest we might have thought extinct just by the look of it. The way it has of rummaging through our closets in search of high heels to gnaw on. In search of those boxes of old correspondence that throws us in an unfavorable light, at best. And ruins all chances of beatification, at worst. The sort of thing we'd prefer buried, out of view and far away, and yet, perversely, we cling to even as the mob begins to

grow enormous. As it gets intoxicated at the prospect of knocking down our doors.

#### Your Word of the Day

Our experience of the hedgehog is limited to the file with which one smooths its quills, if the beast will stand still for such treatment. Or if the neighbors volunteer to restrain it. Their motives are apt to be as murky as our own. Sure, we do good and proper things when the opportunity presents itself. We buy cakes for the disadvantaged and deliver them with ribbons tied at the top. And a Mariachi band in tow to help dispel any gloom that might otherwise mar the proceedings. In fact, you'll find any number of examples here that defy convention, that suggest we are not as dismally self-oriented as everyone claims. This is why the comely women go to one island or another. They know spells that eliminate the competition as effortlessly as one lances a boil. But they will not share them with us for fear that the word will get out among the Swedes. And suddenly you've got people knocking on your door day and night. They're asking to use the restroom. Or they wander out into the narrow fields. Those crowded with plain-wrapped moths and the fever trees sloughing their bark off for the

weekend. And we're all a little vulnerable, what with the flesh coming in for calumny and outright assault by those who don't wear it. Or claim they don't wear it for reasons that have something to do with claustrophobia, I imagine. Or that nearly universal desire to be considered extraordinary. An individual of such unique ability and features, the rest of us line up in endless rows just to get a glimpse. To call home with details of what we've seen. And what we merely thought we saw when other people got in the way. Those with such a love of miniature things, their scale models look like misfirings of the mind. Like cobwebs with nothing at the center. With no respect for what Otto Rank terms the *causa sui*, which is a concept we are so fond of, we will abandon just about everything else to keep it around. Our silky terriers. All those jigsaw puzzles depicting the modern suspension bridges of Spain.

#### The Indictment of Galileo was Rational

They show up with news on their lips as if it had been tattooed there. By an apprentice not long for his field. If we object, the walls move a few millimeters, but that's it. There is no long-running feud to record in our journals. Just a few minutes to reflect on why we always end up in situations

like these. How the vaccine might have made a difference if the patent hadn't been delayed. The alternatives seem just as grotesque. Just as likely to send us wandering, alone and miserable, through the alpine forests. Our ankles swollen to twice their normal size. Our memories stirring themselves like pant. Until we can't tell anymore where we came from, which village houses people with our same name and triglyceride levels. And which merely seems familiar because the children there vandalize houses on the outskirts with bricks. Bless, then, the idle, if you are inclined to feel hopeless, to brood. If you wish to analyze your fondness for pecans, and those foreign students who would like nothing more than to change everything about themselves. To become so much a part of the surrounding culture, they no longer answer to their own names. Preferring instead to adopt that of the state of Montana, for instance. Or the capital of the state of Montana, should that prove easier to recall.

### Wallpaper Dawns

We limit our shivering to the vicinity of the legs, but this is no way to make the forensics team. No way to erase twenty generations, say, of people so clumsy they are given parachutes for graduation. Or invited to pen

autobiographies that have nothing to do with their places of birth. With their love lives or everyday procedures. Like cleaning the sink. Our eyes have a long history of deceiving us. We imagine the soil infested with miniature, mythological beings just waiting for their day to emerge and frighten away the population that no longer believes in them. That turns its collective nose up at the pictures they are forced to paint to keep themselves occupied in the meantime. Pictures so obscene, the artists themselves are apt to get embarrassed in the explication. They wave their interlocutors away – usually just flies drawn to the canvas, not by the subject matter, but the tint. They seem to think they have found a fresh source of nectar.

### Nightmare of the Common Lisp

These attempts at masquerade, at pitching the quarters back in the face of the man who minted them, aren't going to win us any converts. But, who knows? Perhaps venom is just the sort of thing one needs to bring the past back from its cluttered grave. To revitalize it the way toxic bacteria knock the wrinkles out of one's skin. You have merely to put the dictionary down and walk off into the forest, just as a woman might get up out of the dentist's chair and head for the car even with the bib – stained and looking a little like a

half-complete map of northern Europe – hanging from around her neck. Every last one of us looks for the idea of history in history, rather than at the perimeter. Because we have no practice with it. We think such ornate operations something pre-determined, like crystals materializing in stone. Cleveland, for instance, prefers the tympani to the organ. And Venezuela has no organs at all. Only those pianos with four keys we give our children when we think they might be prodigies. But we want to be 100% certain before we make that commitment. The fashion, in the meantime, is to stick out your tongue at the fine ladies enjoying oysters on the boardwalk. They seize like electric eels whenever someone mentions allegory. The possibility of finding value in the things we say. In the Olive Ridley sea turtles hauling themselves ashore to lay their eggs and ruminate a spell on the Atlantic Ocean.

#### Ensoul Your Deeds

They look at me with blank incomprehension on their faces. As if I'd just mentioned the last unmentionable name. The incident that brought them down from the plateau in the first place. And spread them out in their rain slickers and their bone jewelry like silt from a river. Whatever needs said

gets said. Just maybe not with the sort of sophisticated intonation that puts people at their ease. Soon, I am crouching for cover behind the sofa, shaking my fist at the heavens. In a sitting room where no one has ever uttered the word heaven before. Let alone considered the distance between it and us. Or how we might measure that distance accurately enough to provide detailed directions, in the memoirs we are continuously scribbling, even if only in our minds. I make mention, for instance, in yet a further appendix, of a woman who left more than ten years ago. Because the appliances stopped working. First the dishwasher. Then the iron. Which, you'll notice, I keep now on the mantle, as if it were an urn.

#### Axiom for Let

Every endeavor leads to failure, that madness you refer to as mundane because you happen on it with such regularity it becomes like the sun. Or the soil beneath your feet. Something to be remarked on occasion, but otherwise so much a part of the background, the texture, it's easy to forget it's there. Even when it does stand out, it has lost all power to astonish, no matter how virulent or odd its formulation. Just like those newspapers that sweep along the ground in fragments when the wind picks up and a

storm is coming and people scurry for the doorways, hoping to find there not just shelter from the coming inclemency, but companionship. Maybe for an hour, or a week. Conversations that start with inanities and finish in grunts and monosyllables, sighs and unwise declarations. Instinct becomes something grotesque then. The spawn of those brought together unnaturally. By the sound of the symphony coming through walls. The bassoon turning into its opposite. Cold mushroom soup. And any reassurance to the contrary settles to the floor like a tin can to the bottom of a lake, revealing itself only after the passage of millennia. After the monkfish has succumbed to its cousins. You get enough spite stored up like that and there's no end to the good you could do, even if only accidentally. As far as mottoes go, that's a good one. But even better is a saying of the Aztecs. It has something to do with serpents. How they rarely change the color of their plumes.

#### In Debt to Pleasure

Recall ridges lined to the horizon with barbarians who favor pastel colors. Headbands and silk shirts and jewelry of the sort that makes people's mouths water. But serves only to weigh down the wearer so that he doesn't float away. The



heavy stuff. The gold that comes from the bottom of the sea. Talk about your difficulties in extraction! The value of aimless travel lies in its tendency to deceive. To make one remember the marble quarries fondly, the work there something not without its glamour. It's a wonder, though, we don't just fall over dead as soon as we're back on the surface. Smoking, incinerated -- just a pile of bones beside the stroganoff. And the faux crystal glasses. My guess is the body doesn't react to the elements -- rain and thunder and oxygen -- the way it has been explained to us in the textbooks. Rather, it follows its own line of reasoning. One that is no more open to our understanding than is the origin of the moons of Jupiter. Or the thought processes of the limpet clinging to its mossy rock.

### The Root of Our Word Vespers

The story makes its rounds at the VFW, salting conversations that might otherwise center on how to spend money you don't have. Or why aluminum behaves in such predictable ways. It is a point of pride with anybody in that part of the city that they are not made of the same substance we are. They are more creative by virtue of the humiliations they must endure. But does that mean we are

supposed to just sit and molder because the rain is the very worst thing we have to deal with for whole months at a time? Because there are no polar bears unless they got loose from the carnival? No sand fleas so enormous they can be expected to drain the little ones dry in a matter of hours? Up the road, they have a center for experimental psychiatry that is painted pink because its director believes divorce is a byproduct of the industrial colors favored by our parents. By people still arguing about who is going to purchase the shoes and who is going to call emergency services when a pine tree comes crashing through the roof. Again. All of which suggests habit is meaning enough. Once we start doing something a certain way, there is no reason to change it. Unless we desire change for its own sake. A thirst akin to that for speedboat racing. Or insulting people you don't know just as soon as you meet them. Our phone books, though, are another matter altogether. We run our hands over their pages with all the angst and regret one ordinarily reserves for the lid of a coffin.

#### Epic of the Insomniac

We know the details because we've been paying attention. To the obit pages. To the Readers' Digest. The cabinet sits in thirteen pieces, not all of them the same size or color.

Which indicates it is not intended for everyday use. But rather to throw off whichever pursuers we dreamt about when the wine was chalky. Oh, they will know this is coming! But what's to stop the fountain once it has begun? What's to keep the garden shears in their drawer after the lights go out and the dogs start barking in unison? It's as if we have an inkling ahead of time of our rivalries, our difficult decisions and what goes into them, the way turmeric goes into the bouillabaisse. But as for the rest -- those who balance the pencils on the end of their shoes as a parlor trick, those who decry such performances as buffoonish and cruel -- they will remain exactly where they were before this day ever rolled around. Which is to say on their backs in some fashion. Whispering to folks who haven't been seen in years. Who exist primarily to remind us that the highways and access roads don't wander close to streams for no reason. They are there to allow the teenagers to play their fervent games. All in the vicinity of the box elders. And the power lines mumbling their incontestable lessons overhead.

## The Structure of Fable

The pictures of the garden get replaced every two weeks or so with pictures of someone else's garden. Just as if we'd grown tired of admitting we live in one place. That the air above our heads is rife with mud daubers and harp music, while several kinds of salmon swim in our direction. They turn right at the boulder with initials painted on it, the testimonials to the love of one person for another. Even if neither one of them is still breathing. Or apt to remember those starlit nights when they searched each other's pockets for tell-tale signs of bad faith. A telephone number written down on a package of sugarless gum. False fingernails smelling faintly of gin and reflecting such unusual colors, you could be forgiven for considering them hexed, even sentient, when you found them in your palm.

## Animated by Something Light

The obsession with inked objects – oriental fans, tattooed arms on the lady who lives upstairs, manuscripts composed by the founding fathers when they were in the mood for something light, like satire or biography – will get you noticed by those who already have their affairs in order. Who pretend the Earth is one great big chaise lounge

someone took to the curb. But such blessings as they claim are in all actuality as irregular as Addison's heartbeat. Things that wait for the moon to phase in just right or the waters to rise above the flood wall before they'll make their appearance, stick their heads up just long enough to get shot at. Or sketched by those who make a living without a camera as a way of commenting on the modern world itself. You see what it is you're missing, they seem to say as they parade about in the most outlandish garb or duck under train trestles just when you thought there was nothing to duck under anymore. Only white hot deserts where one may bleach bones. Assuming one brings them along, of course. In a burlap sack. But there's the rub. We have no more need of solidity, of the firm undercarriage and the primeval design than a man has need of ontological speculation when his toaster won't work. And that's why we squander every trip to the marsh, why we pursue one another like jackals. And then there is an interlude, a catastrophic pause that seems at first like it was written in intentionally, placed there by someone who knew what he was doing. But on closer inspection turns out to be an accident of the grammar. Of the rules that make such composition possible in the first place. Strange, brittle things you may look up in the encyclopedia if you feel the

need. But are really best left to operate unnoticed and unmolested, just beneath an otherwise perfect surface.

### The 98 Cent Body

Drastic transformations of the landscape almost always occur outside the city limits. But when they do occur within, we have a way of covering them up immediately. Wrapping fences around them, building gazebos, so that if you fall in at that point, no one really considers it an accident. You have, in your perversity, willed the thing to happen and you get what you deserve. Which is almost always a lingering death by hypothermia, though you might be so lucky as to find your way out again (by following the light in a crevice, say), but when you emerge nothing is ever again the same. Your wife makes the toast and looks you in the eyes when you eat it, and when asked to explain this strange behavior, she shrugs her shoulders as if to say any explanation that might be forthcoming is so necessarily alien and incomplete, there is no point in even initiating a response. It is best to just let the silence that sits between us do whatever work is necessary. At least then we'll know where we would have wound up eventually. Despite the path the swans take to safety when startled. Despite the pain in the

palm of your hand that radiates outward just as soon as you try to swallow any resentment you might feel at this disclosure. It's like a spider web, that pain, except it's not visible on the surface. And you're pretty sure it doesn't really exist beneath the surface either. It has been invented, the way you might invent the sights and miseries of someone else's childhood. The way you might, if you had the means and the power, plunge an entire coastline into darkness on little more than a whim.

#### How to Miniaturize the Soul

Commend the idea of flags, of snow. Of sand grains in the layers that might otherwise seem identical if you were to look at them through a microscope. One specially designed to fit your eye socket – a necessity ever since there was that dust-up in the tavern where no one pays in cash. They don't have the patience. The true culprits lie in wait behind the benches, in the yard-tall grass. They say prayers that sound suspiciously like laundry lists. O those chronicles of what occurred on some island nation where nothing has ever really occurred at all. They know how to miniaturize the soul, if need be. They know how to turn it into a package of seeds like that you'd find on the shelf at a hardware store.

But without the pretty photographs on the outside, of course. And the addresses. The suggestions for how to turn your cabin into the kind of fabled destination people drive for hours on the weekend just to visit. Just to tell their friends about when they return because their friends make such stupid, snap decisions. They stick to the edges of every photograph where overlooking them is to be expected. They blend in well with the bald cypress trees. And the sea gulls just arrived from some body of water that, evidently, lies beyond our line of sight. That waits there by implication. And drowns neither actual beasts nor figurative saints. But buoys all things equally. Perhaps it isn't really made of water after all, but something else entirely. Hydrogen gas. A diminished nihilism. The sort of thing one looks for in the newspaper when the car won't start. And breakfast sits half-eaten on the table.



*The Case of the Danish King Halfdene* (Mudlark, 2008)

At Home in the World

Patterns repeat themselves because they're bored. If I insist on making them mean something the way Shakespeare means something or the way a dog means something when it starts to pant, I am guilty of wishful thinking. Or worse yet, hyperbole. Of the sort that makes us afraid to be at home in the world. Afraid to spend the day skiing or even just watching others from our vantage point on the balcony. Which is both comfortable and warm. Of course, this spending our time on the sidelines will provoke comment from those who haven't learned yet to enjoy the hours for their own sake. Who still live forever in the future. Like Charles Guiteau when he chose the pistol with the pearl handle. Because he knew some day it would be in a museum. To which we might reply: "Wake up, Brother, and make your own immortality!" Because we have so little experience with what lives forever, we imagine you must be conscious to create it, never suspecting that it is, in fact, the dream state that is most conducive to bringing off something of lasting power. Something equivalent to the bull elephant's must. When the animal is out of its head in

an ocean of hormones and the pain caused by swollen glands behind its eyes. How one sympathizes with the agony of desire! The overtaking of the rational mind by those instincts that would have us master of everything. Or at least make us want to destroy everything. As a way of showing off. A way of saying, "Look here, I am not to be ignored, anymore than you can ignore the thunderstorm!" Of course, lots of people do ignore thunderstorms. They look right past them to those hours when the sun is shining and they have an appointment with the manicurist. Or the personal trainer who is not afraid to use psychology to get what he wants. But there will always be a few who know you must pay attention to what is happening above your head lest you wind up indentured to the forces of chance. Those forces that drop frogs from the sky on occasion. Or make the milkman a millionaire on the very day his heart has turned to dust.

### Widening the Apertures

The newspapers insist on making us aware of what might otherwise go unnoticed. That the orangutans have fingers so enormous they won't fit into the outlets. And so there is little danger of electrocution. Our need for such happy

accidents is like the peculiar shore bird we call a spoonbill. Always feeling about in the sand. Searching for invertebrates and those misplaced spectacles that play such an important role in the stage dramas of a certain era. You know the ones: with category two hurricanes coming in off the Atlantic like passenger trains. And the passengers in the real trains so sound asleep, the conductor thinks seriously of continuing forever. Or at least pulling into the mountains where his cousins are waiting. And the radio is making its insinuations. I am reminded of the dummy perched atop the ventriloquist's knee. It discovers dark truths about whoever happens to be sitting in the audience. Prefects. Emirs. Old ladies with perfectly good fortunes. They begin to shudder just as soon as the curtain comes up. Ah, the sweep of it! The enormity of art. The refreshments at the end.

#### In the Marvelous De-Centralized Way of Swans

There are people who'd like to take my place, to steal it as though it were a camera and I'd left it on a bench. I believe this even as evidence to the contrary keeps surfacing. The way the girl's hair hangs more to one side than another. The way she relishes her own name, rolls it around on her tongue, like a piece of licorice. She breaks her fall with both

hands, just as they tell you not to in gym class. And sure enough, the novels begin to pile up at her doorstep. Soon, she can't find her way out again and must settle for Sunday afternoons sitting quietly, listening to the furnace. And the clocks chiming in the next house. The sound of them far away. And exciting, like jet planes. In fact, she can't imagine why she hadn't stumbled on them before. When she wandered the neighborhoods. Hoping someone would spot her unusual character. That thing that made her almost less than human. Though she wouldn't have phrased it precisely this way. Instead, she might have dabbled in Portuguese. Or fashioned a club to punish any object that was not attached to her body.

#### The Case of the Danish King Halfdene

Navigational skills are not required. Where you are going is the least of your concerns. Even when the night is something familiar. The stars ending their misery as quietly as possible. The sparrows settling on the eaves of houses where people are just beginning to realize they have no board games that solve anything. They have no sense of what might replace the cupboards. Perhaps we are too clever and the world, a simpleton, resents us the only way it knows how. Actively. And with tree limbs. But there are

those who will insist whatever makes the decisions does so with intent. And they often cite with fascination the case of the Danish King Haldene. Punished with madness. Afflicted by an odor that made his presence unendurable to others. He knew we are alone from start to finish and the finish is always yet to come. But suppose it isn't. Suppose the crabs have already come ashore and the veins in the waitress's legs are visible. What then? How would the calendar be any different? It doesn't matter if the mirror is the length of the restaurant. If the pitcher is half-full of vinegar. What catches our attention when we are looking at ourselves is something that doesn't belong there. Some quirk. The intermittent twitch of an eyelid, say, at the approach of a cold front. Or just before a plane crash. The prediction of calamity when those around us are convinced there is someone watching over them. Or at least paying enough attention to know they haven't had eggplant since they were children. What we decide to do with such things—the tendency for the train to arrive before its sound, the water to climb the stairs like a lizard—depends on our view of signs in the first place. Whether we even think them possible. To doubt them, I suppose, is to wander the forest with a flashlight and several sets of batteries just in case. And a tent that folds up into a packet. It's an approach I'd

recommend for those who don't care much for daylilies. For those afraid they may have stumbled, by accident, into the wrong existence. And will have to stay here. Will have to make do the way a fisherman must sometimes settle for skates.

#### Instructions for Preservation of the Text

They have a gruesome punishment for disobedience in certain districts of the Ukraine. But no one can remember what it is for more than a day or two, their memories (like ours) being something formed of granules, and each granule capable of carrying but one piece of information at a time. The color of an object, say. Or the way it smells like papayas when they have been in the bin too long. The point is the aggregate can not sustain the illusion of unity. It can not be expected to perform the job it was created to perform. Which leaves us where, exactly? Whispering the most vicious insinuations we can muster and still falling well-short of the goal. It will no longer be a matter of the momentous then, but it will continue to be treated as such by those who find themselves without a vocation. Who thought their hobbies would keep them safe from the influence of such darkness as gives the movies an air of impenetrability just when the plot is becoming easy to

predict. When the wind chases the party into the garage, and the people there are apt to notice the odd distraction of the patriarch as he holds forth from his corner on Kodiak bears and why they much prefer the taste of corn to the flesh of human beings. Even the most succulent of children. Those who do not exercise and so give the region a bad name. It's an insight not without its vocal and powerful supporters in the Vatican, in the hallways of the cruise liners that depart from Miami at quarter after eleven and never return. Perhaps they gut themselves on reefs that haven't found their way onto any maps. Because no cartographer is going to trouble himself with that end of the world where only eels are comfortable. Where the sand is gray as your sweater and the language of the locals has no known antecedent. It seems to spring fully formed from the lava and dances on the end of the tongue. Even so, traffic in such tales must of necessity weaken our resolve. They border on the ridiculous the way Portugal borders on Spain.

In Lieu of Lemon Jelly

The boy wonders aloud who might have stolen his socks. The question assumes someone responsible who isn't actually present, just as if we can disappear completely even when there are people searching for us. People who

suspect misdeeds have taken place, that the zodiac itself has been shuffled. So that you can't tell if you are in North America or South America. Probably the latter because, if not, if we were still in Philadelphia, the arrows would all be pointing the other way. And the hydrants would look just like those we remember from a time when there were no hydrants. Only nearby streams. Filled to capacity in September with sunfish and those lanterns you're supposed to rub just as soon as you find them. And you wish for certain wishes that might get you arrested in other countries. Where the zip codes have letters scattered about in them, here and there, among the more traditional numbers, like bird seed. And no sooner have I formulated what I mean, the things I desire like someone lost in the arctic or raised by canines, than the whole of it changes into its divine opposite. That which it would be if there was a heaven populated by actual human beings. Rather than shades and illustration taking a mostly human form. But even this isn't enough to satisfy the longing that creeps up from the elbows like gangrene. That winds up swallowing the whole of creation. Or at least that part immediately surrounding us wherever we happen to be. At the zoo, say, tinkering with those notions of form implanted by an upbringing without much access to the soil. And the beasts



that burrow through it. Looking for an exit, I suppose. Or those inns where people gather in the evening. Around a fire. They listen to the strains of the viola. But there is no viola visible.

#### An Enquiry Concerning the Apparent Dispersion of the Phyla

You'll find no footnotes in this neighborhood, though occasionally something seems to need an asterisk. A bit of pottery, say, broken and written on in a language not so easily understood. Even when you are walking down the street and notice the light on in your kitchen. You suspect there are ways of handling these difficulties that don't involve self-immolation. Or the bed sheets that haven't been changed, at any rate, in over a week. The chieftains call you before their subcommittees. Each member is leering after his fashion like a rhinoceros, obviously mistaking a talent for mixing herbs and speaking Latin for the kind of thing that makes one a superior lover. And we are afraid they will take this to mean they have no hope of getting out again, of repeating the mistakes that made their ancestors great. Or at least people worth painting. You can see their portraits even now, in the galleries. And the

magazines. Next to the advertisements for all-terrain vehicles and escort services. Thinly veiled organizations that promote medical massage. That turn a lousy day into something more exciting without having to resort to Scrabble tournaments. Or those meals where the secret ingredients get revealed only after you've already eaten. In behaving this way, your hosts transgress against the laws of human decency, and even human nature. Though where the one ends and the other begins is a matter of speculation even the cynics decided to leave to their offspring. Assuming, of course, they got out of the bathtub long enough to sire any. Most of them didn't. They just spent all day shoving people aside and combing their hair and scratching certain phrases onto the coins they were preparing to stick back into circulation. Homey wisdom involving the color of the milk in the jug. Or the way you can tell someone will be unfaithful. It's in the pronouns he uses. It's in the palm of the hand, where the lines are trying much too hard for legibility. For a je ne sais quoi that can not be bothered with skin.

#### Very Bad Poetry

Maybe there are reasons we fracture like slate rather than, say, deteriorating like shale. Maybe there are bones we

have yet to discover, lurking under this organ, behind that flap of skin that wasn't there yesterday. They claim Hobbes penned his *Leviathan* on the move, having an ink reservoir built into his walking stick and, I suppose, amounts of paper stashed away in his pockets. It's the kind of thing one expects to see when visiting the Taj Mahal. Or those send-ups of the Taj Mahal one discovers along the byways. In Oklahoma, say, when one is fleeing a past so cruel and out of the ordinary, ballads spring up in its wake like flowers. Petunias and snapdragons. After all, the flagpoles have no angles for a reason. If we aren't sure, though, why something behaves the way it does—why the garbage smells like pine trees in the morning, and vice versa, why the giraffe has to bend that way to drink—it's proper policy to pretend like we understand anyway. That we have been in touch with this truth for decades and wouldn't part with it for a substantial amount of money. Which is not to argue for a subconscious decision, but simply to point out where we have allowed the globe to spin too closely to the fire and so have inadvertently burned off otherwise innocent realms, like Madagascar. Have turned the whole of civilization, in other words, into mere pockets of respectability, places where you might find a decent brie, if you go in for that sort of thing, but nothing of real

substance, like the triangles we remember from our textbooks. Those with such elaborate lines and illustrations placed within them, you couldn't tell if they were there for your broad edification or simply to carry you off with the carnival that was just then leaving town.

### Not Yet the Sounds of Speech

The patterns on the backs of the fish resemble nothing so much as static if you look closely enough. And you have not allowed your mind to be clouded by expectation. By those books that demonstrate how to put together duvet covers and chessboards with materials you find readily at hand. Left over in the attic, say, when the previous occupant had to run for his life. Imagine! Plumbing in a corner of the world where up until recently we didn't even know what the Torah was. We had never bought our furniture from the same store where you can buy your sushi and your microwave ovens. We just didn't know such options existed. And once we were informed, we couldn't have cared less. Sometimes it's better to meditate in the afternoon than whisper to some deity you can't even be sure wears any clothes. How embarrassing would that be! Your grandmother prostrate before a figure naked as the

day he emerged from some other figure's forehead. Or from the foam on the ocean created by some dreadful, pre-sexual deed of the sort we dream about now and then. But we don't understand because we are so thoroughly steeped in the world of flesh and caresses we can't imagine one where such things have yet to be invented.

#### A Disturbance in the Magnetic Field

Your ardor is something puzzling. To be worked out over decades. If you put that much time into anything, you will, of course, be rewarded eventually. With a break in insurance rates. Or the kind of attention normally reserved for Chinese chefs and their offspring. If you wish to disengage yourself from the process, though, it is going to be frowned upon by those who have spent considerable time preparing the conference rooms. And arranging telecasts that run the gamut from haughty to downright threatening. Even the fire escape begins to look tempting. And the bald places on the surface of the sun cause more than just a disturbance in the magnetic field. They become a means of knowing ahead of time that the radio is going to pick up stations it doesn't ordinarily pick up. Every claustrophobic knows, for instance, that walls are, in fact, a wonderful invention. The kind of thing that keeps people

from inferring your motives. From following you around with their eyes the way others keep track of events at the opera. Consider Albertus Magnus, a man mute and feeble-minded until he turned thirty. And was offered a magnificent career in philosophy or the church by the Virgin herself. Just so long as he understood it would all revert back to simplicity before he was dead. That the tongue would go thick in his mouth, and the ravens circle overhead, while he was still trying to perfect the Elixir of Life.

#### Progress as a Way of Historical Thinking

The doubt that might allow us to pluck ourselves from the center of our own narrative is precisely the same needed to plop us back down again in the asylum. And so maybe it's best to allow the backdrop to spin past in whatever guise it sees fit. We'll continue on our way as if the horse that sways beneath us is just the sort of transport we requested from the beginning. Of course, the resistance is in the cells; it lurks there like pederasts. Take, for instance, the Pacific Ocean, which for all its glory and boundless area is still dwarfed by your hope that there is something after this existence. Something that allows you to get one over on the athletes in school who always jumped a little higher than you could. Who tormented you with nicknames and

occasionally made off with your street clothes from the locker. How this would be rectified in the next world has yet to be determined. And there is always the chance that simply wishing for such rectification will make you unfit to receive it. But that doesn't stop the mailman from dreaming his days away in the front seat of his truck. When the sun gets low in the sky again, he is forced to throw whole bags of undelivered mail down the storm drain and hope that no one is watching from behind a curtain. You've noticed struggle suits the anaconda as well, the shape of its head making it seem as if the animal knows what it is doing. When in reality it is simply following orders so ancient they can't be expressed in words. At least not those you or I are accustomed to using. Words that make a sound like that you'd hear when striking an empty kettle. Of course, we must accept anachronism in this instance. Because if we don't, there will be nothing left over to give to the children. To the artisans who are relying on our generosity. On our being able to see through any scam that requires the almanac. Or that hooks its prey much the same way the osprey does. Meaning, from above.

## Twilight of the Big Finish

Like Morris sketching Rossetti's wombat in the garden, we have no clue as to what's going on above our heads. The storms pull themselves together around increments of sand and the trumpets blaze even with no one at the mouthpiece. You realize there is a time for reverie and a time for making others pay by cashiers check. Even the lights on the stove fail to make the air around them seem more ethereal. More cataclysmic. Like Pompeii. Or maybe we just aren't used to this being on our own. Drifting on the waves. Like Pip made insane. Someday we'll get used to it. If not, there are always discount moving vans. Rakes to rent by the hour. By the day. It's as if we will not settle for this one option, death, made to seem like ice cream in all its variety. Its ingredients and color. You've seen a hundred such examples. People thrown about by their vanity. By their Newfoundland dogs. Like old shoes someone left outside in the sand. We feel sorry for them. We moisten our lips at the corner. But the climax is always the same and always comes at ten-fifteen. It is accompanied by dancing girls. By those strong men who carry pythons around on their shoulders.



## All This Fervent Fare

The consolations of badminton, no less than those of philosophy, reside precisely in the ability to transcend the situation. To convince the participant he is at his best when in the rough trough between two ocean waves. The one blocking out the sun, and the blisters it induces. The other soaking up every last envenomed bit of the box jellyfish. Water is, in other words, not something to be accorded its own viable position, its own place in the cosmos and appreciated for what it is, any more than you might study the habits of the fingernail—how it adds its layers one cell at a time, on average every two minutes and twenty-seven seconds. How it reveals more about its owner than is generally understood. It is a marker, a clue to what we didn't even realize was missing. But suppose we pay attention to such things when they bare no fruit? When they hop along beside us like animated creatures escaped from a cave? Does this mean we are any smarter? Does it mean the waves of nausea that come calling in the afternoon will turn around now and beset some other person? It's as if we think the savior still present just because a photograph or two haunts the hallways downtown, insists on its own relevance the way we insist on eating at least two meals a day. Even when we aren't

that hungry. It's what makes the mystery novelist seek that sort of place out, a setting so murky and without substance ultimately, you are liable to confuse it for your own soul just when you had become convinced you had no soul. Only a temporary resident. A hermit, if you will, not at all certain his surroundings will suffice in the long run. Though he is impressed with the curtains, I'm sure. And the trays on the table. The salt meats. The butterscotch. Perhaps it's best someone makes off with the body then, sells it to science like they did with Sterne's. Otherwise, we're stuck recounting the events of our lives in such incredible detail, no one believes a word. Not even the pelicans roosting in the windows.

#### A Gold Horse-Head Above the Door

Interest will abate with the waves, and people return to their normal way of regarding us. With a suspicious leer from the doorway. You may go about your business then the way the Vikings did. With careful deliberation and long hours in the field. Punctuated by a week or two every summer of violent blood-letting. A caterwauling at the moon. That this will get you fined should not deter you in any way. For what we lose by way of physical liberty, we gain in enlightenment. Or just something that looks like

enlightenment. A glow, say, caused by the lights atop the stadium. This is one of the great attributes of mind, the fact that it can engage itself without being overly conscious of its participation. It seems to think sometimes it is simply here to register the workings of an autonomous world. When, in fact, it is pulling the levers. And painting the back drops. And hiring the crew. All the while being, as it were, in a coma. If we are to escape this predicament, we must whisper to the mind to let it know we are present. That we will not give up on it no matter how long the recuperation may take. Can the mind hear such pleading, such reassurance? Opinions are mixed, but most will tend to agree with the author of the Life of King Edward when he states that the king's inability to stamp out the feud between Harold and Tostig in 1065 led directly to the fall of the Anglo-Saxons themselves. The lesson here being: one must be whole on the inside, without division, lest someone cross the channel and make you speak French. Or, to put it in previous terms, the mind can hear you, but it ought not to listen.

#### Getting Through the Last Pages

We expect the sun and the rain to strengthen the dandelions in the front yard, and the dreams we had as

children to return in formal attire. But, more often than not, we are disappointed. Our fingers never seem quite long enough to reach the surface, to touch the world where it actually is. And the infants go on bawling, just as if they'd seen the end of things in the salt shaker on the table. The trespassers are only doing what we've all been told to do at one time or another. Namely, find the gates to some plantation that isn't on the map. That floats, in other words, between this world and some other. Where the flamingos travel in pairs and nest on mounds of jewels. Such things as the Phoenicians made, especially their famous purple dyes, extracted from murex shellfish, can't dissuade us from entering once we get a good look at what's inside. Whether that be from the barge or the repair boat that shows up shortly after we've departed. Because something is wrong with the captain's quarters. There is always something wrong with the captain's quarters, it seems. At least according to those who've had the privilege of spending time there. Because they were invited. Or, more likely, because they won a contest. And went around to all their friends claiming luck is not something you command. But it will listen to suggestions just the same.

## Official Version

We were hailed right away. And offered an alternative that might have seemed reasonable at the time. But turned out to require an investment in orthopedic braces. And the sort of Cadillac that can still make a man's mouth water. No matter how many crepes he has consumed in the meantime. Still, they belittled us in songs they made up for the occasion. And accompanied with bagpipes they found in the attic. They couldn't resist dragging them from their hiding places like lobsters. If only such tomfoolery had a better name, a better appellation to accompany it across the Atlantic, we'd all be in the record books now. We'd all be doing interviews for those magazines that record the slightest whim and facial tic of anyone who has tasted success. Like that joker who can be trusted to chew the raw stem of an artichoke during the whole of your office Christmas party. That's when we have to temper our outrage with something slightly less intoxicating. A book of stamps. The black humor that passes for wisdom in mining towns. Like those nearby that sprung up over the course of a quarter century. Then disappeared again twice as quickly. That turned into patches of yellow grass. And the occasional burnt-out house frame standing by itself in the light of the afternoon sun.

## In Xenia, They Prefer Zeppo

The goat, says one, can learn almost anything provided you give it enough time. Like how to play the harmonica? says the other, clearly having access to a much better sort of education. Which reminds me: how can we know the fables without being able to recognize the animals attached to them? Or the bars of their cages? If you look closely enough, they do not resemble cages so much as living rooms. The one spends so much time in his living room, the other begins to wonder if he has been evacuated. After all, a storm came through and it drowned nearly all the midwives. All the filmmakers, still carrying their canisters full of raw footage—what would have become your typical homegrown, grotesque Americana. At least, that's how some people describe it, when they are feeling particularly demonstrative. Oh, I get it, says the one, there is a pun in there, looking out like a kitten. Or an anemone. The other is much too subtle to get caught out on the record like this. He trundles off with his washtub under his arm, certain the hymnals will arrive in plenty of time to revise them.

## Hold Your Tongue

You can borrow what you will from On Plymouth Plantation. Act as if you have every right to be here when the whole world knows you have stumbled from non-existence the way someone falls off a bus. Acting the part, though, has its advantages. No one will argue with the diary in the mattress, its pages stained with what looks like blood precisely where you would expect a liquid that means something. Not one of those cooked up in the kitchen or the lab. Our patience, because it is something acquired from others—a pastor who threatened us in our youth, a woman who spoke of feathers as though of lost symphonies—abandons us just soon as the sun begins to set. And normal people plan for the three or four scenarios that present themselves then. Like ambassadors. From Bhutan. You may know already the people of Katak Huyuk were carving images of a goddess giving birth to men and bulls more than nine thousand years ago. An indication we think the world goes about its business in a labored way. It needs our assistance. This is not insight, though, but handicap. Something handed down from your father after he has finished painting the shutters green. Something he says to you when the radio is on and you can't quite make out his words, but you understand the gist of it. Because he says

the same things over and over again. About the jungle. About the women who smoke cigarettes because they are nervous. Because their hands seem suddenly large as balloons. If only she had known this before she went away. Before she came back, I mean. And then, she went away again, I imagine. I can't be sure because, even when she's missing, there are signs of her presence everywhere. Dropping from the sky like acorns. Turning up in the margins of a book. Her name spelled out there in a shaky hand. And vermilion ink of the kind you find in cheap pens. Certain inedible octopi.

#### Spring Cleaning in the Labyrinth of the Continuum

The bell rings, but when you open the door, there is no one outside. Only the faint smell of gasoline, and a dozen roses. Not so much as a councilman to give them context. To allow us to say to the heavens: What a shame! Or prance about in our pajamas with all the pre-determined abandon of a troop of maenads. One that meets every other month to discuss investments. How wax figures ought to look like someone in particular, rather than just blend in with their surroundings, like fig trees. Or those cement mixers people offer top dollar for when they hear there is one available on the black market. And they wash it out with scent of parsley.



They set it next to the bookshelf, for those who might otherwise miss the symbolism. Suppose your neighbor took out an insurance policy at that point anyway. With the same outfit that refused to fix your basement. Would he know that his actions are not determined after the fact, but settled on ahead of time, by committee? Would he even recognize his own picture in the file they keep there like a Caravaggio? Which means in a back room, out of sight. Otherwise, temptation multiplies until the children in the neighborhood all know that something is amiss. They just don't know what to call it. How to give shape to their foreboding without first abandoning their cap guns and their kewpie dolls. Throwing them down the well with mock solemnity. And a real-life cat.

### Why Light Was Invented

That we expect blossoms to be a certain color and texture, that we find them in the alleyways and gather them up in our fists, is not to suggest that the cold eye of the realist should be lower on the totem pole. Or that we can just bounce from one myth to another, and all the while keep burning the English muffins. Special pleading seems to be the rule for those who keep combs in their pockets, those who tender their resignations in the tone of one who never

had the job in the first place. But don't be fooled. Don't even be illuminated. The nightmares that keep us awake in anticipation are the same as get reviewed in the newspapers, by men who think them sordid and unpleasant, the sort of exercise in masturbation that used to qualify one for the asylum. Or fatherhood, whichever came first. Usually the latter because it takes time to convince others you have spoken to people who do not speak back, who loiter in your closet like nuns and floss their teeth obsessively. Up to twenty hours a day. Just as if they are afraid any less than that will be seen for what it is—a rejection of the concept of order. A bowing out of the universe itself. Perhaps it is they, then, who tell us the pyramid in the back yard should probably be in the front. Because, otherwise, passersby are not apt to notice it. They will miss out on the grandeur and the mystery that comes of it being shaped the way it is. How it appeared one morning without the least hint of where it came from or what it was doing there or who might have constructed it. Though such considerations are never really as important as the thing itself. The sheer true brute fact of it standing in the sun, next to your Japanese Elm.

*Six Kinds of Weather* (Recycled Karma Press, 2008)

## Writing His Own Life

He often returns to those moments  
when he discovered something vital.

The time he realized his mother drank  
or that his teachers thought him slow.

Mere glimpses originally, they become  
discourse running hundreds of pages.

The question then is one of invention.  
Did the child really steal a mantle clock

from a department store and then throw it  
into the woods because he was scared?

Or was this merely a way to introduce  
the celebrated chapters on mutability?

At some point, enjoying a quiet renown,  
a habit as deeply ingrained as opium,

he realizes precious little separates fact  
from the lies that make it up, an idea

that allows him to travel down rivers  
that have yet to be explored or named.

There is a woman who causes an anguish  
even the prophets might have admired,

and a coming to grips with immensity  
before the night sky and a bottle of gin.

But who would, in his perversity, insist  
such things have a life of their own?

They're like colors before striking the eye.  
Or the people Plutarch didn't mention.

#### After Their Kind

Inventory was a nightmare.  
He had an endless list of folk names  
for beetles that all looked alike.  
Seven days out, the leopards took sick  
with a fever that made them cross.  
He'd discovered that both the giant sloths  
were female -- big trouble later on.  
But he had enough to worry about now,  
what with the weasels eyeing the vipers  
and the nematodes proliferating  
in the boat's grain reserves like plague.

He had to watch for salt  
in the frog tank because a frog's skin  
is sensitive and a frog will complain.  
Besides that, there were the special diets,  
the herbs and the sea sick remedies,  
each beast hollering for its medication  
until the whole vessel sang with pain.

Sometimes he imagined seeing a hole  
in the bottom, sending everything down.  
He scanned the horizon, hoping for reefs.  
The orangutans didn't smell very good.

They escaped their cages and gambled  
with his sons, who were expert cheats.  
He said, I don't understand why I'm here.  
Did God forget how to make things?  
Shortly thereafter, his wife got the cowpox  
and wouldn't let him touch her.

Once, he thought he was on an island,  
lying in a hammock and drinking wine.  
There wasn't a bird sound in the sky,  
not a single solitary whisper of animal life.  
Emptiness is holy. He drank it in.  
But that had been a dream. The hyrax  
was homesick and wouldn't eat a thing.  
The bonobos turned the Gila monsters  
into handbags. The mantis went insane.

### The Inferno

The worst part is the waiting.  
People in line in front of you.  
Papers to sign, financing.  
Someone once said God must love  
the common man because

He made so many. Yet here we are.  
Maybe we get what we deserve.  
Believing in this place, I'm told,  
constitutes a serious character flaw.  
At any rate, advance reports

have been misleading. There are no  
circles, just the tedium of hallways.  
One door looks much like another  
and the reception rooms stink

of camphor and rubbing alcohol.

It's not as bad as it could be, I guess.  
The vending machines have fresh milk  
and the cashews are reasonable.  
Still, sometimes I get lonely.  
I long to run into family or friends,

unexpectedly, like on a cruise.  
But I know I am just being selfish.  
You have to think these things through.  
Once, a man wept for his little girl,  
and she showed up. In her slippers.

#### Six Kinds of Weather

1.

Today was the coldest day ever  
in the month of July, at least  
in this town which is shaped  
like a uterus or a spoon.

2.

I'm lonely. The gin stays  
in a cabinet beneath the sink,  
beside the bread and the plums.

3.

The rain was splendid, warm  
on the coldest day in July.  
The rain showed its hip bones.  
It danced in a tight dress.

4.

Official records start 1870.  
Cloudy & mild, we're dying.

5.

Today my neighbor overslept.  
She blames the weather,  
says a mirror fell at work.  
The sky looks like skin.

6.

My daughter is in school now.  
She dreams she sees a rabbit  
in the closet and another  
on a boat on the ocean.  
The wind is restless and warm.  
My daughter eats plums  
in her dreams and says  
the weather is blue on tv  
and patient and full of names.

#### Concerning Immunization

Our children start out as carriers  
of disease, poisonous as apples

sprayed to keep out of season.  
True innocence is not healthy.

We want fever. It refines disease.  
Our lives make fever proud.

A timid woman walks into the ocean.  
A man refuses to leave his house

until the wind is cold enough  
to force him back inside.

We distill ourselves in the enemy.  
We walk in his shoes and steal them.

We find proper accent and taste.  
A man reads the same book for years.

An alcoholic takes a sober oath  
and knows why he will drink again.

A child sees herself in a mirror.  
She thinks there is more to vision

than the strange and deliberate eyes,  
the image that is no longer hers.

### Concerning Fractal Geometry

Heroic size is a matter of disease.  
Norse explorers stuck in Greenland  
wore out the gene pool.  
Their children were eight feet tall.  
Our green giant is that particular color  
because of a bad pituitary gland.  
Science knows everything except  
how the Norse wound up in America.  
The Indians thought them gods because  
they were so tall. Some were hump-backed,



others missing limbs, but symmetry  
is not required of the divine.  
Our jolly green giant peddles corn.  
He'll be dead before he's thirty.  
A bad pituitary gland, like all things,  
is an exercise in fractal geometry,  
simple patterns repeated over scale.  
Like the stones the Indians stacked  
for their new blond gods –  
long-houses on the North American shore,  
the Norse hollering, "Get busy,  
You fools." Or "Erik likes your sister."  
We enjoy getting pushed around by giants.  
We give them power over our lives  
even if they can't stand on their own  
two feet. The green giant sells corn  
to people who can't see how fast  
he is fading. This is pattern too,  
simple and empty, like what's left  
of the Norse settlements in America.  
The stone chimneys and long-house walls.  
The endless repetition of lichen and ice.

#### Concerning the Naked Woman on Her Porch

The Greeks had a word for it, *ate*, a visitation  
from the outside, the supernatural come to  
set up house in the middle of one's chest.  
But she isn't much interested in terminology.

She is presently taken with the tulips just up  
beside the driveway, the petals on the stalks  
looking this way and that as though curious  
about the movement of the world, the traffic

and the sparrows caught in their tantric spasms,  
their restless need to be in as many positions  
as possible before the sun sets and the sycamore  
takes on the look of the dead. The peculiar thing

about *ate* was not that it made you behave  
in irrational ways, trade your golden armor, say,  
for some in bronze, but that it was alien,  
a state that seemed to belong to someone else.

For the Greeks, then, the intellect *was* the Self,  
and anything else was strange and unwelcome.  
But the woman, standing as she is, wholly naked  
on her porch, might quibble with strict formula.

The breeze, made cold by its long trip over lakes  
and through the forest still littered with snow,  
ignites something like fire just beneath the skin  
and wakes her to the possibility of becoming like

the birds, those same sparrows rummaging now  
on the tops of houses and free to ascend a breeze  
if they so desire, flight being the very emblem  
and effect of this or any state worthy of our attention.

### Night Song

The neighbor shouts,  
and faintly, like something buried in the air itself,  
there is a threat on her life.  
At least these are the words  
of the baritone as I understand them.  
I am upstairs,

in the bathroom, and I wish the light were off  
so that I could turn it on.

There is a great deal of banging,  
fences and door frames,  
and a car pulling away in the rain.  
Frustrated violence.  
All of which leaves me alone  
with the question of my role.

I walk downstairs.  
Jung is waiting on the couch  
where I left him  
to re-consider his theory of the *animus*.  
Maybe come up with something  
that slops outside the lines,  
that refuses to obey the rules  
like some child taking the obligatory test.

Third grade math.

There are nights  
when nothing you do is right,  
when contentment is a form of cowardice  
and the radio is too loud.

My wife is convinced the neighbor  
is an exotic dancer,  
a woman who bears what matters least,  
a conclusion drawn  
from the woman's hours and appearance, and maybe  
my wife is right, but who can rejoice  
in the powers of induction  
when she is asleep, and I ... well, I  
am in the company of others.  
People I remember suddenly

and for no reason. The teacher  
with the boil on his lip.  
An uncle in thrall to the bottle. Salomé  
and that head.

### Against Precision

Bass, the low end, doesn't tiptoe.  
It's not an old man but a Kodiak bear.  
Who cares where it places its feet,  
the number of steps to maneuver  
the fallen tree stump, the cliff's edge?  
Think totality, the bristling hair,  
the sound it makes in its throat before  
you ever even see it.

The high end,  
the mandolin, the human alto voice,  
trembles finch-like, not long for this world,  
but it too has blood on its mind.  
The inundation of the world by sound.  
The ten thousand wing beats it takes  
to drive the rival from his perch.

### Drift

He left his brother face down in the snow,  
struggling still and making a sound far away  
and dismal, like someone talking to himself  
in another room. Off the bus, he had navigated  
the drift big as a chapel and deep in the middle,  
by skirting the edge up high, but his brother  
had plunged straight in, seeking a direct route.

He was honestly disgusted at this lack of nuance,  
this typical misreading of the cold earth itself.  
He didn't wait long, didn't say his brother's name  
more than twice, just marched up the long drive  
to the house where maybe someone was waiting,  
someone could do the hard lifting after prayer  
or screaming, whatever one said against the cold.

### Tractatus in Glass

He rode his bicycle along the fencerow  
and wondered why there should be a fence  
at all and asphalt on which to ride and  
overgrown fields full of red-winged blackbirds  
that repeat the same series of sounds  
without variation as if they were machines.

He stopped at the abandoned school  
and threw rocks through the few windows  
that hadn't already been broken and thought  
he was always arriving late, to ideas like  
the idea that he might not have existed at all,  
and to the uneasy dismissal of that idea  
provided by the sound of shattering glass,  
by the familiar thrill of picking up a rock  
and making it go where it wouldn't otherwise.

The birds around the school, crows mostly,  
said things he thought he understood,  
not the necessary utterance of machines  
but something willed, something that had to be  
the way the fencerow when he pedaled home  
had to separate the overgrown fields from  
the asphalt, and one another, and the sky  
had to shatter before you saw its constellations.



*Through the Funeral Mountains on a Burro* (Otoliths, 2009)

To Speak of Species is to Speak in Circles

Just as the clay clings to your shoes when you've been laying pipe, when the bulldozers arrive to create space for yet another municipal park and they uncover arrowheads by the dozen, so the films of the past move at a frenzied pace. Their makers didn't study the same physics we did. The bamboo in the background stands for something. It suggests the frontiers are not so distant as we once believed. Often, the animals get involved, and they behave in ways that seem familiar at first – giraffes looking for a meal in the tops of trees, turtles acting kind of surly. And then some twist, some arbitrary change of location that makes us think we are dealing with creatures that have no reason to keep up appearances. They can doff scales, their pelts, in the blink of an eye. At this point, our instincts try to take over. But there is no room inside the skull for more than two or three. That of self-preservation, for instance, is crowded out by one so new it has no name. We're not even sure how best to describe it, other than to refer to its oddly yellow tint. The way it makes us call, on occasion, to the ravens that stand outside the gate.

## Quadratic Equations for the 27 Unknowns

He discovers a note under the cushions of the couch, a passionate recounting of the first time she met someone who didn't smell somehow like raisins. She thought perhaps she was going insane. What he admires most (besides the elegance of her handwriting, the way it leans always to one side like a fence) is the certainty with which she handles her emotions, the expertise, the willingness to throw them into the air like clubs, knowing full-well that they will never come back down again. Sometimes we realize the point of view is not what separates us from those in the room. It is the mechanical nature of their limbs, the guerilla metaphysics that lurks just behind each utterance they make. So that we throw things over the cliff as a precaution. The gallons of milk, the untold numbers of prophylactics still in their packaging. I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be better to just admit that the first impression that strikes the eye is a mistake, a malformation of whatever it is that actually takes up space out there, like gold bullion in a pirate's cave. But I know I am just being sentimental. Someone will come along eventually and change all that, will make us think of the bed or the broom closet where we first felt someone else's breath on the back of our necks.



## The Urchin's Dream Become Reality

We are given instructions by no less a personality than Teresa of Avila, floating above the folding tables like a dirigible. But not one of those you used to be able to hop aboard and ride across the Atlantic. Rather, one of those that advertises a clearance sale close by. You have merely to empty your mind of every last scrap of worldly desire and those strange buzzing, humming bits of detritus we call a "self" in order to take advantage of it. Who hasn't found himself in a similar situation? You are on the other side of the city with a grocery bag full of money, a bus barreling down on you, and no knowledge of how you got there. No specific plan as to how you are going to get away. It's the kind of thing they make operas about, when they've stopped making them about other things. When the public has had it up to its elbows with supernatural plots and acts of vengeance that seem so much like acts of kindness, ultimately, we can no longer tell the difference. And for all that, we still manage to sprain our ankles on the curb outside our condos, still manage to frighten away our last chance at love. Or what must have seemed like a last chance when it was dressed in the sort of skirt one may purchase in Guatemala, and nowhere else. The sort that advertises the quality of its materials the way fireflies are continually

advertising their location in the back yard for reasons we only think we have deciphered.

### The Road to Taxco

It's not the outline that disturbs us. Not even the texture. But the gravy that wasn't there when we first arrived. That seems to have fallen from the sky like Manna. Only it tastes better, and there isn't the question of fees and penalties. Of distribution rights and the garbage backing up in the stream. I barter away the best of trinkets – the flowers made of broken glass, the glass made of the sand one extracts from the center of the termite mound. And still, I am treated as if I had never cashed a check. As if they expect to see me pull the scabs from my elbows and make of them something sinister. Or melodious. A statue that has inside it another statue that composes music by turning certain pre-arranged gears. This is done with the help of the wind, I suppose. Or the spells we used to cast on one another in the mountains when no one believed in spells any longer. We used to stay up late, concocting them with balls of yarn and phrases we had picked up from the user's manual for the leaf blower. They didn't work. But they didn't leave us feeling entirely vulnerable either.

### And Clearly It Must be Hard When It is So Seldom Found

I have procured the snorkels. We wait on an outcropping. When the bus comes, it's obvious the driver doesn't understand the meaning of the word "recrudescence". Eulalie is too impatient to wait for me. She waves away the anchor. Sometimes we think the world is made entirely of sandstone. That it will crumble at the touch of a thumb. Between rocks, I stumble on slugs the color of peonies. I've been told they crave blood. Eulalie is gone again to the village. I imagine her there, wrapped in blankets. Music tumbles out of the spaces in the thatch of the roof. It sounds like someone drowning. But what does that mean? Where does it slough off its physical nature and turn, as if magically, into some kind of statement? Some kind of order that communicates the same credo and disease to me as it does to the men gambling in the corner?

### Concerning the Mazurka Chopin Dictated on His Death Bed

Extinction is waiting just beyond your fingertips. It hangs in the air like those acrobats who have no place to practice, no real affiliation. They pester the neighbors, jump around on their roofs. They pull the laundry from the lines and, every now and then, sprain an ankle on a vent. If we didn't fear

silence so much we'd send them on their way. And maybe this is what the world is counting on. At least that part of it that makes space, that clears out the living to make room for the dead. It knows we are lonely. It knows our final tally must somehow get beyond the number one. And yet, to hear some people tell it, the advent of the marvelous is just around the corner. Just up the street where the mountain is draped in concrete and galleries. Where the old women go to get their hair shampooed. And the jeweler is neck deep in opals.

#### Carving Heads Out of Boulders

What we saw was so much less than what we had been expecting. A few copper coins. A ribbon tied to a safety pin and unraveling at the edges. Maybe someone had packed it away when the conflict in Korea got its start. But then forgot about it just as quickly as he forgot exactly where Korea was on the map. How you could differentiate it from Iceland, say. Or those islands where people are forever carving heads out of boulders and lining them all up in a row. And perhaps it's premature on our part to start demanding explanations of such things along the borders of the map. Where whoever is responsible for putting them together is

expected to do more than just leave things blank. There are columns to be filled with numbers. And abstract patterns holding out against the emptiness of the night. And the cold. And the sound of the coyotes moving about in the underbrush as if they expect to find there something of interest. A discarded sandwich. Or an infant who is not just any infant, but one of those fabled creatures like Krishna who take the whole world on their shoulders. And move it occasionally – shake it so that our saucepans tumble from their cupboards – all so as to keep the meteorites from splitting it down the middle.

#### Attach the Harness

The committee is still undecided when it comes to the part played by simple chance. The toothpicks tumbling from a box by the hundreds. The sales pitch delivered with a nasal quality reminiscent of those times when we thought we would all wind up emperor of some kingdom that hadn't even been surveyed yet. That hadn't coalesced on the bank of the river like salt crystals forming in the sun. Ah! to be young again and wishing we were old! To be certain the afflictions of old age are more than compensated for by the wealth that must accrue to it, the way feathers are part and

parcel of a bird. I remember sneaking into watch the westerns on the cinema screen that was as tall as a palm tree. And the evil men made off with the heroine. But no one went after them. Not a single soul took to his horse in pursuit. And I thought maybe this was just an oversight on the part of the director. Or the haberdashers on set. People who believe that the mind is itself infinite and ought to be left alone to determine the nature of the rising action. Much the same way it determines the direction of its own thoughts. By embracing that infinity. By stubbornly insisting on trying to document it through an exploration and cartography of the sort that hasn't been seen since Poncaire and Duhem. When they demonstrated the successful prediction of events by a theory in no way ensures that that theory is correct.

#### Folly's List of Companions

Calluses appear out of nowhere, as if they had been conjured into existence by people who believe the skin is the same as a sketchbook. Or a piece of canvas stretched out ahead of time so as to allow one to formulate ideas in the mind. The way mildew builds up in the shower. What follows then is a re-telling of that uncommon event. But by

re-telling I mean a specific sort of invention that might be confused, by the uninitiated and the poorly-fed, for myth-making. Even out-and-out fraud. I really must insist whatever opinions you form in the process should be wrung out thoroughly. And hung up with the animal skins. Lest you mistake them for something to get ecstatic about. Something to badger your colleagues with when they are still trying to get fully awake in the morning. Relying on harsh stimulants and their memories of those times when they didn't have to get out of bed at all. When they were invalids and their happiness knew few boundaries beyond those natural to the condition.

#### Down to the Horn Archipelago

We might just as well turn the lights on in the hallway. And keep them on. Might as well start work on our biography of William James. Because no one's going to believe the excuses we've relied on traditionally. The wading pool. The recipes involving capons and wet pieces of paper. If she surrounds herself with plastic models – German Panzer tanks and those swamp creatures so popular in 50's cinema – it won't restrict access. It won't turn her into the type of person who answers phone calls with a disguised voice.

Who tells you the skyscrapers are really not as perfectly perpendicular as they seem. Because how could they be? What with the ground rising and falling with no discernible pattern? The streets changing their names as frequently as one changes the bedding? But then, when have we ever been asked to memorize the *Epithalamion*? When were we going to throw the knotted bed sheets out the window and climb down? You have probably been approached by the woman in a plaid mini-skirt who sounds sometimes as if she were suffering from a respiratory ailment. She is not to be trusted. But this doesn't mean you should be impolite. Ask her about the rugby tournament in the town where she grew up. Nod your head affectionately. But don't overdo the charm. Sometimes charm has an air about it that reminds one of the aurora borealis. And those poor slobs who spend their evenings beneath it, tucking into cold ham sandwiches. Discussing the hidden meanings in the plays they intend someday to write.

#### Small Concavity at the Base of the Neck

1.

The parking lot is the logical scene of the crime. But when you look closely, you can discern very little. A few packets



of mustard. Insects scurrying about with other insects in their mandibles.

2.

He follows the trail of sand grains to the corner where there is, inexplicably, another corner that faces in the opposite direction. He thinks this an impossibility. And considers reporting it to the commission tasked with keeping track of anomalies, even the least significant.

3.

But he knows they will file this one away as simple delusion. And head off to a picnic that has been scheduled for weeks. There, employees who barely know one another will pair off and start fondling.

4.

They will explain themselves later as having been possessed by something irrational. Something with teeth and tortoise-shell glasses, that makes the woods its home.

5.

They will make reference to the Hai-uri, a Hottentot apparition otherwise known as the half-man. Possessing just one leg, one arm, and one side, and becoming

completely invisible if you should look at it from the wrong angle.

6.

Upon being met in the open, it will challenge all comers to a wrestling match. And if defeated, will provide knowledge of secret medicines and turn the victor into a shaman.

7.

In the meantime, there are ways to save on the phone bill. That's assuming, of course, you wish to speak to people who have no real desire to speak to you.

8.

People who remember vaguely some good times in college. A few awkward back rubs. And nights when you all snuck onto the grounds of the city pool. But that doesn't mean they wish to re-kindle these things twenty years later.

9.

They have skin conditions to worry about now. They have sheds on their property where occasionally something goes missing. Shears. Portraits of their mothers they painted

themselves. Or which were commissioned and so cost a fortune.

#### Sufficient to Create a Phobia

Eulalie stands thigh deep in the river. There is a roar like the axle of the Earth close by. Mist emerging where the rest falls over. Perhaps she is considering the almanac. Where does it originate? What can you make it say? And so the factor of belief increases precisely as the disparate pieces increase. As those that can not go together go together and the sutures stand out like knuckles on the hand. I call to her from the bank, promise all devotion will be covered in blankets. It's no secret we have dreams sometimes with Eulalie in them. But she has someone else's eyebrows -- taped in place. Abysmal. Monstrous. Like something in the films of the 1930's. An archetype with no right to the name.

#### Borrowing a Line from the Gettysburg Address

We feel less inspired to accomplish anything once the Earth's orbit has been explained to us the way you might explain the molting process to a child. Which means diagrams and those legends at the foot of the diagrams that

could exist by themselves and never need to be ashamed. They are like lesser figures from *Beowulf* given their own epic adventures by a poet who thought he might be doing them a favor. But who was really just causing a stir where there didn't need to be one. And isn't it distasteful how we rummage about in the past looking for a name or an anecdote, some quasi-literary gem to illustrate what we have no ability to illustrate with our own invention? Has it really come to this, our minds so withered by time and under-use, we must draw on the vision of men who lived three thousand years ago? In sweltering tents or caves decorated all over with pornographic images drawn by the older children? And the rudiments of an alphabet drawn by the younger?

### The Infatuates

Someone whispers from across the room, and yet still makes herself audible through a process we have no doubt took its substance from magic. Is descended from it the way we are descended from snakes. And isn't it funny how all of that merely vanishes with the accumulation of days? How we no more think of the horrors that disturbed us endlessly when we were children because to do so would take our

concentration away from the horrors that disturb us today. Sure, the cleanliness thing has been overstated. And there are times when we'd just like to be granted the leisure to compose for the bell choir. Or to read the whaling manuals we inherited from our great grandfathers (men who, nevertheless, went their entire lives without setting eyes on the sea). But plenty of opportunities still present themselves for our edification. And for undermining the structures that hold up our communities, like balloons. If we don't take advantage of them, well then, we deserve the label that gets affixed. Even if we can't read it. And if we can, then we ought not to tell the others. Because they will want to know what else we have been able to determine while they were left to fend for themselves in the cypress swamps. Battling scurvy. Listening to those songs that are composed of almost nothing but words.

#### Fugue, Commencing at the Toes

We must check our instincts for unbounded admiration before they turn us into runway models. Or worse yet, the people in the audience who wish they were runway models, but who don't feel as if they have yet perfected the sneer, the grasp of pre-Raphaelite aesthetics necessary to succeed

up there. Or at least turn the passions into a kind of folding chair on which you may sit comfortably while everybody else gets knocked off his feet by the spinning of the Earth. You'd think people would get sick of waiting. But maybe they don't mean the same thing by "waiting" as we do. Assuming, of course, we can come to some sort of consensus ourselves. I remember a time when you couldn't get people to stop whistling even if you'd gained a hundred pounds. If you went about it intentionally, hoping to deflect the attention that might otherwise have been directed at the hummingbirds. And their habit of trying to run each other through with their beaks. I mean, enough's enough really. And if we can't concentrate on one thing at a time, we might as well not waste our time trying to concentrate on two.

#### Finland's Answer to Indifference

You go back and catch all the letters on fire. All the lists and recipes and false notes that seemed at the time a good idea, but turn out to be just the sort of thorn that works its way into the flesh unnoticed. Which means the flesh is more gullible than it ought to be, I suppose. Or there's a message in the air, and we must be amphibians to decode it. And

maybe that was the plan all along -- to gamble toward madness, to accept that the rule of unintended consequences must, of necessity, dictate a stilling of the mind. A filling it full of holes on purpose. But even that won't address the fundamental problem, which is one of people questioning their x-rays. They think themselves ascetics. Or the next best thing. A jockey on his horse. It's like that every time we think we have the flaw isolated. We wind up with river mud on our faces, and it's not the pleasantly aromatic kind either. It has slivers of tin in it. All of which makes you decide, finally, to do something about your snake bite. To cut x's into the flesh as you were instructed to in grade school, those instructions coming back now in a haze that may or may not have something to do with the venom.

#### The Ostentatious Inner Self

I'm sure the habit of endangering everything you own and everything you are (a telephone pole repairman, say, or a Mickey Mouse criminal, the kind that boasts of having stolen things he couldn't even lift) is one few of us would wish to break. If only we were so lucky as to know what it means to be in love that way and not think it a silly

aberration. The kind of thing that happens to children when they've had their tonsils out. Or the moon suddenly comes upon them in a clearing. And insists on following them around. The way a man follows a woman into the gift shop at the airport. And she doesn't seem to mind. At least not at first because she thinks he might be something she's conjured from a textbook. A math problem she'd stumbled on young and was never able to solve. And so it stuck around. It put on weight and began to seem like a human being. If only because it found neglect unbearable. Something so painful, even the pithiest bits of Epictetus were powerless to put a stop to it. And that's when she understood the shadows cast by others are not merely accidents caused by the angle of the sun. And the height of the person speaking. But signs. To be heeded as if they'd come from inside your own body. Like palpitations, synaptic miscues.

Isn't Elderberry

I drop the towels into the tub out back. And fall to my knees and make enormous circles in the air with my index finger. The general idea of what it is I'm requesting can't be put precisely into words. So I attempt additional illustration.



Though, to be perfectly honest, all illustration seems hollow as Salvator Rosa's *Martyrdom of Sts. Cosmas and Damian* when one is shooting for the equivalent of his brooding seascapes. Nevertheless, the damage has been done. And it doesn't seem to be all that bad, really, when you think about it. After all, the windows are still in their frames. And if there is some dust to be found on the couches, it is not the sort knocked loose by the sudden shifting of the crust of the Earth. But simply what you might expect after the maid has been through. She wields her clump of feathers the way children wield their wooden swords – which is to say with such aplomb and delicacy of wrist as to suggest the day is at its end. And the night is coming with its truckload of stars. And if you try to follow their positions from one month to the next, you will discover that they are eternally restless. Who wouldn't be tempted, then, to abandon his hard-won position to have a shot at such treasure? Who wouldn't divulge the location of his wife's diary? There is nothing sacred or obscene about such decisions despite what you might have been told. They are simply things that happen when they happen, for no particular reason. Like the emergence of toads from the soil after it rains.

## For the Sake of the Fair-Ankled

The reference shelf is almost completely empty, reports to the Secretary to the Department of the Interior coming due and no one left to type them up for a fee. Remember when you could buy almost anything at the drug store? Lion cubs, dish towels and Listerine? Whole wheelbarrows full of sentient beings and necessary products that seem, now, to have vanished quite into thin air. Perhaps this is why we spend so much of our day, each day, drinking. We find the most comfortable bench on the square and try to stay out of sight of the sheriff, of our former professors. The Economics chairs, the masters of rhetoric. Even those who started off in potato science and worried their asides would all begin to sound like Russian novels stacked up against the inside of the door. In hopes of keeping someone from pushing through, I suppose. Someone who might insist otherwise that you marry her. But only because she thinks it something expected, something given, like that portion of the lips that separates them from the surrounding skin. That forms a line so subtle, even the torchlight can't set it off properly.

Like Tycho de Brahe on his Sorcerer's Island

Something needs to be said regarding the pipeline, the avenue through which the despair is arriving. You may believe such things just appear out of nowhere, like snowflakes. But I happen to know through long experience that the emotions too are transported from one place to another. They start in the high steppes and arrive with very little fanfare in most instances. Just a boy and a girl standing on the sidewalk and waving their miniature American flags. Don't let this fool you. The centipedes, for their part, understand and so crawl under the awning during the hottest part of the day. That doesn't mean they've forgotten the insults aimed at them. It's just that we haven't time for any of that if we wish to make it to the awards banquet on time. There are those who will say we never deserved any recognition whatsoever. We just went about our business like Tycho de Brahe on his sorcerer's island, our minds on the heavens and our bodies on the decline, until notoriety and fortune caught up with us because we couldn't outrun them. We couldn't even climb the stairs.

### Left Walls Induce Right-Skewed Distributions

Sure, the word “dog” appears where it is supposed to – in the center of the page. Next to the picture of what can best be described as something canine. But without all the excess body hair. Still, you sense there is some other message lurking just beneath the first one. As if whoever designed it didn’t trust the rest of us to understand what he was after. As if he wasn’t entirely sure himself, but didn’t want to admit this. One can naturally inquire – just how much negation is necessary when engaged in such entertainment? Where does our sense of self turn into a sense of nothing at all for reasons less than laudatory? It’s the very question that leads Aeschylus, in *The Persians*, to have Queen Atossa speak nonsense syllables. In hopes the audience will take them for actual spells and incantations. Uttered in a foreign tongue. Imagine the dismay, then, at finding you are not invited! At realizing the clouds that pass by overhead are genuine and not merely part of the spectacle. Or the machinery of the spectacle, which you had always before considered the same thing.

## The Desired Result

You'll excuse me if I sneak out as the Beethoven reaches its crescendo. It's not that I don't admire your earrings. It's not that I think them something unbecoming, like a wart on the back of the hand. It's just that I've been invited to the coronation. And there is going to be a fiddler there. Sitting in the corner, reminding one of those children who had all the advantages in life and chose still to mark up their arms with felt pens. Chose to whittle boats from the Styrofoam you find on the outside of brand new freezers. Once, I got a bit of it in my eye and the lady down the road knew just what to do. She dunked me in the cold water of the cistern once or twice, then said some words over me in a language I did not understand. Albanian, most likely. Too often such measures guarantee the desired result. And then we are forced to wile away four or five more hours in conversation. And innuendo that doesn't get us anywhere. Or, when it does, just seems like the kind of work you always swore you would avoid. The kind that bent double the backs of more than a few acquaintances. Turned them into connoisseurs of brandy. Because what else were they going to do? Learn to hold the camera straight? March off to the bus station and demand their fifty dollars back? No, the world goes about its business without paying any attention to our

attempts to influence it, to make it obey our bidding as might one of those magician's assistants that are forever turning up in bad B-movies. And how old are *they* now? Has the deadline passed and the demand grown so miniscule, you can't recognize them without squinting? Have the standards been updated using stone idols? The garden Francis of Assisi, for instance? Or those other saints who once enjoyed a similar renown? But who have since become anonymous – known only by their shape and the sound they make when you drop them on the pavement?

That There is an Exit

Expect seizures. Expect to be introduced to those who don't know where the exit is. Or that there is an exit. They've grown accustomed to giving up, explaining themselves after the fact by using images drawn from the biographies of the pilots. And the story of Osiris accompanied by her seven scorpions. I suppose each represents something in particular. Like avarice. Or knuckle-cracking. But it's hard to distinguish, especially all these years later. One looks so much like the other, even in the hyperactive confines of the mind, he wonders if there is any point waiting at the bowling alley. She will spot him from a distance before he

can spot her. Her eyesight is astronomical. Perhaps because she doesn't know what French kissing means. She doesn't know who invented the camera obscura.

### Ergo Mother Goose

Illness radiates outward from the impact zone like rumors. Or those salesmen who have a quota to meet and can't agree on which strategy is best. That perfected by the nuns in their hovels. Or that first sketched out on construction paper by juveniles trying to imagine a world where they are no longer situated at the bottom of the ladder. Where they are appreciated for the pleasant aromas that emanate from their mouths. It's like they always say – watch the bugs with brightly-colored legs. They got that way for a reason. But maybe the gift of olfactory sensation, when it's taken to such heights as one finds in the wolfhound, can filter through the hazards that hide from the mind otherwise, like pennywhistles. Or the bone fragments that float about in your hand for months and even years after you've scraped it across the concrete in a fall. Or been escorted out the way I was – meaning by two or three women so beautiful and ultimately wrong-headed, I couldn't help but consider them refugees from some draconian set-up in the warehouse

district. Victims of their own alluring present. And the void that had settled in behind their breastbones like a cousin come from the Midwest, dragging his suitcases behind -- his manuscript copies of the Polonaises and Mazurkas he had been working on all summer.

#### After the Shock Has Been Inflicted

Standard viral infections seem to insist on their own importance, seem not to admire that word “standard” at all, but fight against it the way dogs pull at their chains. I know the seal hasn’t been broken yet, and so whatever was contained in that package remains there to this day. Morphing into own opposite. Trailing its legs out behind it like a stain. I suspect the mind communicates with itself through a membrane we haven’t discovered yet. Something viscous certainly, and smelling of rancid flesh. But only when it is introduced to the atmosphere. When the mind is alone with itself, locked up like a convict on the island of Montserrat -- who knows! Maybe it is entirely without properties. It flutters between this canal and that truck stop like an insect that has yet to intuit the brevity of its own life. And how does one utilize it in such circumstances? How does one determine which shoes to purchase? And what



card to put them on? And why we aren't marching in that parade where everyone else seems to be having such a wonderful time? It is probably a matter of knowing the right aldermen, of securing for them rewards having something to do with the body. And its preternatural appetites.

### Lonesome for Other Shores

I should like to ride on top of one or the other of those animals still housed in the tin building. The gentle beasts that have yet to learn their own names. Once that hurdle has been hurdled, there is no erasing the savagery that must, of necessity, ensue. It folds its hands in its lap and extends the talons on its feet. And you know which one to watch out for and which to include in your next screenplay. The last having proved so disappointing to those who had a glance, they wondered aloud if you might not be better served by taking refrigeration courses at the career center. Or at least meandering over in that direction. Otherwise, her letters of introduction will go to waste, and besides! Who hasn't heard of sickness starting in the mind and radiating outward until it bounces off the inside walls of the skull? And returns to where it originated, like a flock of geese, I suppose. Or those crows that say the same thing

over and over again. That repeat themselves because they're lonesome for other shores. They pine away like schoolgirls. But – trust me -- my situation is graver than all these. It is the sort of thing one used to find in illuminated manuscripts. The sort of thing that gets engraved on the inside of one's wedding ring. In fact, it might be there already, and I just haven't looked closely enough yet to discern it.

#### Defined by the Number of Hands

You button the buttons on your coat with great regularity. Almost as if you are afraid failing to do so will attract the notice of those who don't have buttons on their clothes. And will make them think you a visitor from some other, nearly inaccessible culture. The kind you've heard about, briefly, at cocktail parties where the host isn't sure if she is supposed to encourage such behavior. Or discourage it with a vigorous application of the cat-o-nine-tails. And that's always a gray area, isn't it? Something to push the mind out of its rut, when handled properly. But apt at times as well to cause a disorientation like that you might experience when a rock has come through the windshield. Or a dove has attempted to do the same thing. For reasons that no

one can gather, really, given that doves do very little that looks -- from the outside at any rate -- as if it is wholly premeditated.

### Bonheur d'Occasion

Our sentiments sit out in the open like buzzards, eyeing the scraps close by. They have been known to undertake a difficult journey. Not because it will make them better known in their community. But because the journey is the perfect metaphor for something that doesn't involve cages. It insists on its own freedom the way we insist on taking the bottles to the curb even when they're broken. Think about it for a moment: who's going to want to use such things after the sun has come up twice in the same day? The first time was expected, of course. And the second didn't really surprise as many people as you might have thought. But this just means we are never entirely sure which of our suits to wear when the occasion is somber. And which to wear when it is lousy with fresh fruit. Apricots, mostly. Or those striped things they are forever trying to pawn off on you in the tropics. Something hard to explain to those who think everything just popped up the way it is right now one day for no real good reason at all. Just that somebody decided

that it should be so, and it was. Or he said it was, and then he changed his mind because everyone changes his mind. It's something that goes hand in hand with having a mind, I suppose. And if you can't accept that, then you are probably going to be reluctant to accept that the change, in this and every other instance, was not predictable ahead of time. It was as random as the tearing of one's sleeve on a barbed-wire fence. Though not the coming upon that fence in the first place, as we were already out in the fields trying to retrieve our cattle.

#### Committed Sometimes Only in Jest

I remember a time when we didn't care if there was going to be an epidemic. We just shrugged it off as one of those things that occur without our having to know why. You could drive yourself insane, we reasoned, trying to figure these things out for yourself. That's why the library was there. That's why they stuffed the library full of books about Mesopotamia. Today, we stumble on the prostrate bodies of people we used to know. Stumble on them whenever we are leaving the grocery store. Whenever the wind has turned our old neighborhood into a toy like those you keep on the shelf in the children's room. Those that make a

sound when the battery is dying. But only a faint, complaining chirp designed, I suppose, to remind you that there are consequences that don't behave like consequences. That don't stick their hooks into your skin and wrestle you to the ground. But you need to be wary of them just the same. Because whatever they lack in size and wit and fury is more than made up for by a tendency to congregate in numbers. To pool their resources much like a colony of ants. Or those people who grow artichokes and onions and rhubarb in their backyards. Then arrange to trade the excess for any pornography their neighbors might have on hand.

#### Post Hostile Machine

We return with our heads under our arms, as if we expect at any moment to be assailed by ravens. And not the literary kind either, but those that haven't lent their names or dispositions to so much as an ad for lawn furniture. Haven't followed the river to where it becomes something without boundaries, something so enormous the engineers are scratching their heads. They keep returning to that moment when they understood there was nothing prosaic about space. You couldn't just file it away in a box and expect the

populace to forget that it had, at one time, been the very thing that kept them from running into one another. Funny, trying to start over like this. Trying to imagine where we had been the evening of the eleventh. When the officials had convinced themselves, apparently, that to go searching for one of our party would be tantamount to admitting we no longer look our best. They have conjured up the weather that still haunts us these forty years later. And I'm aware of the inconsistencies, the shallow parts of the reservoir, but who wouldn't insist that the argument should continue nonetheless? Who wouldn't want his picture in the brochures? Lots of times the blue crabs cling to the bottom of the curtains, hold on with such persistence and rabid temperament, you'd think we had told them to look elsewhere for love. That they weren't welcome in our homes no matter what holiday was approaching.

#### Lost Voices of Jamestown

##### 1.

His conscience becomes inflamed and the only remedy at hand is a thorough sanding it and splashing it with cologne. Anything with alcohol in it so as to cause an acutely painful sensation. Still, he wonders if perhaps he hasn't ventured

too close to some boundary that wasn't advertised, some place left off the map for very particular reasons.

2.

The gravel pit in the center is apt to contain secrets of its own, treasures and skeletal remains clumped together on the floor like cousins collapsed from exhaustion at the reunion. But she knows he is just throwing blankets over the scenery, just trying to pretend that he has the same mechanism in his chest as the rest of us, even though it is in all actuality a blank slate in there. And whenever you try to draw something on it, the image won't take, the lines will not appear.

3.

And there is a sound sometimes like steel on steel, the sort of thing you would expect to throw sparks or make those in the vicinity cringe. If it hadn't been for the aspirin she might have been tempted to give up entirely. To move with her best friend to the high plains of the Dakotas and start there an alpaca ranch. Maybe marry a man who hasn't come to grips yet with his name. Who thinks it something valuable, of course, but can't pinpoint its origins, its true nature the

way we can't always tell what is on the horizon even when the horizon keeps inching closer to us like an assassin.

4.

I imagine there are days when they will not forgive each other simply for existing, and on those days, if you were to take a photograph of the two of them sitting in the kitchen, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. It would look just like any other taken during the year when their minds were occupied with the simple tasks lying before them. The dredging of the pond. The sticking of aluminum poles into beehives to see if the occupants still wish to protect themselves.

5.

Sometimes, when you reach a certain critical mass, every individual begins to see himself as an individual again, and refuses to follow the others, even if the direction they are taking is the most obvious and logical one. Can this be bottled? Can we take the inclination and turn it into a philosophy of the sort that sells a million books (and not of the sort, like Bergson's, which sells maybe two or three a week, worldwide, if you're lucky)?



6.

His alarm starts ringing and they are both looking around for the source of that noise, as if they can't imagine sharing in any auditory stimulus unless it is absolutely necessary and absolutely real. In this way they each reject the primacy of the other and a sort of balance is established, even if it is negative and predicated on a desire for mutual elimination. It's the same principle that keeps the planets from running into one another, at least for the time being. And there's the rub: who's to say what will happen in a month's time, if the sky might not ignite with the fury of heavenly bodies turned in on themselves like children who watch too much TV?

### Our Hybrid Nature

Axiom: the energy one expends in practicing arithmetic always equals or surpasses that expended in the pursuit of ducklings in their pen. You can't expect to figure out the one without taming the other. Though, of course, in this, as in so many situations defined by the witnesses who describe it, the reverse does not necessarily hold true. You can pick up the scattered bits of porcelain. You can stack them up together on a shelf. Nothing is going to make the object that

wasn't an object before you set eyes on it turn back into what it was before. The universe just doesn't operate that way. And for good and proper reasons. Can you imagine being stuck in a place where the blueprint is always in reach of someone whose mind didn't form properly? Whose fingers are of no use for pointing? I'd rather be somewhere else, myself. Even if that person is tagging along. Even if he is saying things in his sleep that make such perfect and obvious sense, we are afraid to repeat them.

#### Having Upgraded Their Bridges

The symptoms are secondary. A thirsting after illusions of the sort that don't register with the common thief. You can spot the disconnect with binoculars. But be prepared to defend your position. For even those who've been to the launch center argue that it doesn't exist. That its primary purpose was usurped before the Cold War was over. And the daylilies arrived at just about that time. Coincidence? Not hardly. But then, who would suggest it was? Who would drive all this way from the township where they haven't upgraded their bridges in years? Where the simplest shift from the center to the periphery is apt to send you careening down the sides of the canyon like a dog sled

no longer attached to its dogs? And for what? The opportunity to confess to something no one actually did? Something that would shock you inordinately should you hear the details later? We have a sense of the correct much as you might feel someone watching you from across the bar. But your cousin is sitting in the way and you've already made eye contact with someone who is more to your liking. With red hair. Or dimples. Or a wad of cash visible in the fist. And the music swelling to a finale that doesn't seem entirely earned.

#### The Despair of Wanting in Despair to be Oneself

Whenever we stake a great deal on a future that is never actually going to arrive, we feel let down ahead of time. As if we'd discovered the sun is just a practical joke played by someone who is not especially funny. As if light itself didn't actually have the properties ascribed to it by the physicists or the witchdoctors. But was rather a liquid handy for treating certain flesh wounds and for causing an intoxication unlike any other known to man. Perhaps we set about looking for the unearthly in an altogether irresponsible manner, and then got what we deserved. The donut with gravel stuck to the sides. The questions and

recriminations. Just how much of it had she been involved in and what made her think she could whistle her way out of trouble like those suspicious bears and other mammals that forever show up in cartoons? With sweater vests a little frayed around the edges. With partial amnesia from falling one too many times off the roof of a nearby home. You know what it's like: Even that which does show up doesn't remind you of anyone. Doesn't encourage you to look through old yearbooks, your finger in your mouth and your eyes grown weary with the strain from the dim overhead lights and the cigar smoke. Though where that is coming from is anyone's guess. There's some suggestion that the neighbor downstairs has taken up a number of unpleasant habits. After his retirement. And the operation that took spurs out of his elbow. But even these are just rumors, and not the sort of thing that would lead to redemption. Unless they turned out to be true.

#### An Actual Infinity of Parts

The patterns begin early -- the wanting to stay up all night. Hoping to find someone you know in the tunnels that crisscross beneath the city. They have a name for this ailment, but they rarely utter it out loud. Because if they

did, no name would ever again be off-limits. It's the kind of situation you find yourself in sometimes when you meant merely to ask about the health of a friend. His diet of veal and crustaceans. And you inadvertently offend someone in the next aisle. Someone who, only moments before, was speaking in whispers on the phone as if he were under surveillance and he knew it. He had figured it out without any real assistance from those who make a career of spotting unusual activity at the edges of our lives. Walking sticks with strange ciphers on them. Wheelbarrows suddenly full of foodstuffs and crumpled-up envelopes. Cut orchids turned to powder in the heat of the afternoon sun.

#### The People Had but One Neck

It's always like that – the content of our speech somehow wrapped up in and smothered by the style of the delivery. As if we concentrate too much on the flowers in someone's lapel and fail to determine what a lapel is good for in the first place. I mean, she has never actually seen one on those suitors who keep reminding her that her beloved has gone missing for more than twenty years. And maybe it's time already to move on, to pick someone from the field who doesn't have eczema. Who doesn't spend all day at the gym

trying to make his arms look like aluminum attachments. With unnumbered tattoos snaking their way down the triceps. Each meant to illustrate some important moment in the past of its owner. Or at least suggest such moments have, in fact, occurred. In other words, you don't have to worry about the climax. We've got all that covered. Whether or not nightshade is involved, whether or not some plot to unmask the imposters will play itself out as part of the process, it's only necessary to remember that you will be expected to do the hard work of exegesis on your own.

#### Opinions Before Lesions

Maybe your doppelganger didn't understand its role, its obligations. And so it wandered off to the fish ponds at the edge of town. And it scared people because it had a funny accent. Or it didn't know what its own name was. It answered to almost everything. This doesn't mean we can act as if the outcome was predictable. Or that someone like Grendel was right to go in first, to try to take out the uninvited horde because he thought they might have designs on his mother. Right is right, after all. And you can't really determine why something isn't right until at least an

hour and a half has passed. Otherwise, you are so close to the event, you can't even legitimately call it an event. You can't know how it differs, in its boundaries, from every other string of endless moments during which nothing of any significance happens at all. It's like jumping off a cliff when the cliff is no longer located where you thought it was. Perhaps it has been moved. Or perhaps you simply remembered its location incorrectly, as has been known to happen when it comes to our most important places. Like the meadow with the cement figures buried in it. They had no faces. We wanted to sculpt some, but no one brought along a chisel. Perhaps our fingernails would have served just as well, but we will never know. Those days seem as far away now as the shores of Delaware. We have no hope of reaching them. And yet, we pine after them with such vehemence and fury, the vocal coach himself has begun to get concerned.

#### In the Spirit of Geometry

They fly over the settlements, looking for some sign that a more traditional approach would be welcomed, that they wouldn't wind up on skewers. But the only thing they record is a goat chained to a post and several dresses hung

out to dry on a line that stretches between a hut in the south corner of the compound and a latrine in the center. This must, of course, be the result of poor planning. Or maybe there is some symbolism here that will take decades to decipher. Whatever the case may be, our patience is wearing thin. You can expect a certified letter announcing our decision. Though the decision itself isn't binding. It's like those superior parts of the self that don't wish to participate in the larger process. They hide away in their dark castles. And when finally they are called upon to serve whatever function it is they serve – to utter a word in Latin, to startle our closest friends with some vicious witticism borrowed from Heine – they balk. They begin sniveling and arguing in circles. Then demand to be left alone with their mastiffs, their aperitifs.

#### The Eyes Outside That Study Them

The locals pop thistles into their mouths as though they were bits of hard candy, the last remnants of some district-wide decision to undermine the health of its own people. It's similar to what you see sometimes on the remote mountainsides of New Hampshire. When the year has turned out to be much more humid and unprepossessing



than expected. When the mapmakers show up in their modified golf carts and bring parrots of modest color, lanyards and yo-yos. Products that go for a premium in places where ceramics have, until recently, held sway. And still, we refuse to do anything about our unlovable children, claiming they might not be ours – that we found them in the back pasture and tried to chase them away with flare guns and the blunt end of a shovel.

#### A Doxology Falls Into Place

Every appointment presupposes a janitor who scrubs the place down with lye. Who remembers a cliff by the river named for someone who didn't really do anything at all. A cliff where the spectators gathered at dusk for a performance that was rumored to take your breath away even if you had fine lungs. But the truth, as is often the case, was something different. A condor-like apparition rose on the other side. And everyone thought it was going to speak. They nudged one another with their elbows. But no sooner had the thing cleared its throat by way of preamble, than the heavens opened and the poison arrow frogs came to life. It was as if they'd been waiting years for this moment and they weren't going to let the elements get in their way.

We admire a stubbornness of this sort that sounds, at first note, like despair. It turns the mind into a corner, replete with men standing around barrel fires and traffic signals with arms that come out of the side and tell you whether to stop or proceed. Because everyone knows light isn't going to get the job done by itself.

### Evolutionary Implications

Imagine if every fork had its tines dependent on the operations of your intellect, had the shape of them and the tensile strength and the color subservient to the front of your mind. What would happen when the winds came and the shutters made such noise as has been referred to recently as a juggernaut or palindrome by poets who should have known better? They bathe in oils brought over on the slowest steam vessels still in operation, taking an average of twenty-eight months to make the crossing. And in all that time, radioing in for neither help nor advice, just disappearing from view. Except for that of the occasional gannet looking for its next meal in an ocean of meals, not a single one of them as savory as perhaps it should be. But who knows? Perhaps the inclinations of our winged brethren are not so difficult to chart. You can start with a

piece of paper about twenty centimeters in length. And if that doesn't offer ample enough room, you can always forget the whole project, as no one held a trowel to your face. Perhaps there are evolutionary implications. Something to do with the high vault of the night sky and why we always look to it when we are feeling of out-of-sorts. Why we believe there are patterns there that somebody else created.

Through the Funeral Mountains on a Burro

Strange, how we assume the world will find its consolation without us. Like that hunchback Leopardi, convinced illusion is the only substantial thing. But where do we go when the illusion itself starts to unwind? Begins to seem as flimsy as a paper boat of the sort we used to float on the stream that passed behind the hog pens. The water foul and dark and making the banks unusually verdant. Unusual for that place, at any rate, and time, when sepia seemed to hang in the air itself and we thought in terms of flashback from one moment to the next. Never certain that we would be allowed to continue into the future by virtue of there being no real future to speak of. It was the sort of thing other people had because they could imagine it. They could

form it in the mind and shape it the way you might shape a piece of granite. Even if you had no tools. Of course, the wear and tear on the fingers would be discouraging. The propellers too are in a perpetual state of disrepair. Flaking paint. Blades bent at an angle not efficient for propulsion. Still, the weather hasn't become so disagreeable the terns are tempted to begin their migration early. They construct their rookeries on floating mats of vegetation. And I ask the ranger why they have been scratching at the feathers on their heads recently. Why they seem intent on making the rest of us feel smarter than we actually are. He doesn't have an answer. But really, the only observation necessary is that our descendants won't care what we found once we got here. Just that we got here on time.

### Math Games for the Active Child

The lines seem to intersect at more than one point. They don't behave the way we've been taught they should – with the dignity one normally associates with caretakers at the zoo. Those who think the penguins their particular wards and works of art, entities to be enlarged upon and delivered to a wary public. But the sacrifice is not nearly as painful as it might seem from outside, where we have our socks

wadded up in our pockets. And the mist that hangs in the air does so through a kind of lethargy otherwise described in the literature as indicative of mental disturbance. A testimonial to the uneasy peace that exists between the sky and the earth dotted with caverns of every depth and description. Some of them home yet to cryptic figures drawn, even carved, on the walls by visitors who were looking, probably, for more than mere shelter. Who came there hoping to discover the abode of some deity or another. Maybe all of them at once.

#### Bellini Seraph Strumming a Theorbo

Not entirely polite thoughts run through the head like a pack of wolves. Except they don't share the same instincts, preferring instead to have at each other rather than tear some soft-bodied animal to pieces. Something outside the pack. Foreign to it, the way cantaloupes are not anything like typewriters. Though you can make the claim that the one compliments the other in a secret, censorious fashion. It is a process you might be familiar with because of all the days you've spent tearing the flooring out of the house where you grew up, selling it for scrap to a man who considers you beneath contempt. And for what? A little

brandy dripped on the chin. Some high dollar sneakers that don't fit properly and so make you limp a little on one side. We chase the regard of others about as if it were a camel and we have a rendezvous on the other side of the desert. Perhaps, then, the natural world doesn't behave the way we tell it to behave. It doesn't become infected with our will and desires. And yet, it doesn't really have any of its own either. Perhaps we are at sea with it, in the long run, as we are with the symphonies of Mahler when we hear them on the radio in the car. And we are forever passing under bridges and past concrete barriers. Or hugging air strips. We have no choice but to request confidentiality from those who haven't been able to keep a secret since the day they did something ghastly. Like that man who bricked up his rival in the fireplace. And toasted to his spirit at the restaurant afterwards. As if he couldn't hope to enjoy the spare ribs and cole slaw until something was said about our fortunes in the next world. And the one after that.

Glory is Pleasure Accompanied by the Idea of Some Action  
of Ours We Imagine Others to Praise

When was the last time you halted your pursuit based solely on the fact that what you were pursuing had no legs? If anything, it makes you turn up the speed, discard every

loose bit of clothing and every unwieldy object you might have stuffed beforehand into your pockets. Those magnets that look, for some reason, like the letter U. The coins that, when laid out side by side, seem to alternate colors like the skin on a lizard. Perhaps it is an optical illusion. Perhaps the science has yet to catch up with the eye. But we know there are hillsides where, if you wait until the moon comes out to illuminate them, you will miss the most extraordinary sights. You will trip over the human bones that brought you there in the first place and think them merely stones.

#### On Reaching Some Dim Haven

Our complex natures keep getting in the way. They crowd together on the sidewalk and won't let us pass. As if the same sort of revolution that occurs in the Congo basin is occurring inside without any justification. You simply see the feathers arranged a certain way, listen for the chanting that sounds like it is coming from a chorus of juvenile delinquents. But should we expect forgiveness when we don't even know what the word means? We have a vague inkling of its importance and throw it around often enough like a Frisbee. But then we find reasons why we shouldn't have been included in the experiment to begin with. First,

we weren't asked. We simply show up for work one day and find a bunch of lab technicians. A bunch of priests and men named Liam. Just standing around with their cups of coffee and their ordinary clipboards -- on which, if you were to look closely enough, you might discover the name of every human being who has ever existed.

### My Heart Leapt Towards It

I have to admit, these attempts at reason appealed to me greatly before I went to study with the Bedouin. Before they taught me to think with my feet, to travel with my follicles. Feel the hairs stand on end and then follow the direction they are pointing. Perhaps it's better to remember our promises after we've already broken them numerous times, after we've stitched together a fabric of lies and paranoia large enough to float a balloon. And I don't mean the kind they give to kids at restaurants. Though those are pretty nice too. If the form is pleasant to the touch, even if it is appalling to the eye, we will not shrink from it once we're past the age of thirty-five. Once we've become comfortable with the disparate nature of our desires, with the fact that what we want differs from day to day, much as the heavens can never seem to decide where they should be in relation



to the soil. Sometimes they are distant and full of moons and sparrows. And sometimes they are as close as the blister on your lip.

### An Alchemy Peculiar to It

We find our lack of anything approximating social dignity so horrifying in the abstract, our only recourse is to start bragging about it. Turn our drawbacks into strengths of the sort others will recognize, even if we have to cover them in red paint. If the plan succeeds, it is generally understood that the beneficiaries will not be those with the coats thrown over their heads or those who feel the inexplicable need to assist the most vulnerable with their proofreading. If there is a lesson here it's that no one has found that place where you can be subject and object all at the same time. I suppose it has something to do with tundra or river or stone. With allowing ourselves to get stuck in the current where we leave the steering to that which has an infallible sense of direction.

## The Outline Concepts Take Before We are Given Their Examples

Eulalie knows where the sky is vulnerable. She paces about the rectory. Three bald-headed men confront me in the garden, and I am reminded of the *Iliad*. They recite their prayers with the tips of their tongues forever in contact with the roofs of their mouths. As if they have been coached. Eulalie dabs at my elbow with a piece of cotton that looks, in the dim light of the universe, like the outline concepts take before we are given their examples. Everywhere the mountain groans. It's as if we were expecting souvenirs, says Eulalie, her patience worn to a point that glints. And what we got was ordinary apples.

## Asking the Spider What it Knows About Desire

To hold what you don't want as if it were a piece of bread. Eulalie turns over rocks, speaks from the corners of her mouth. We are convinced something tells stories, and it isn't us. The ozone hangs in the arms of the ferns. The teeth in the mouths of complete strangers begin to seem menacing. She is looking in the wrong places. Better to sweep out the corners of the house, to ask the spider what it knows about desire. And where it learned it. She lets me

touch her knee, but only so as to feel the wound there, the cartilage pushing through. Eulalie tells things backwards, but no one is listening. So I listen. There is the spider expressing its skepticism. The tongue that has yet to be perfected.

#### On the Varieties of Defeatist Opinion

The tower isn't getting as much attention as it used to. It isn't going to be awarded a certain prize after all, but will simply be short-listed for the remainder of its life. And so there is an outcry from everyone who thought he knew the proper position to take under such circumstances. In fact, the proper position to take under any circumstance – that of outraged citizen. Caped crusader (without the cape).

#### Within the Body of the Tribe

I was told to wait for twenty minutes. And when the fire alarm sounded, to act as if I had never heard such an excruciating racket in my life. There are those who might have considered this excessive preparation. A kind of rolling your pennies into the pillowcase. But I understood garnets and meringue don't just appear out of nowhere *mutis*

*mutabilis*. Like those scratches on the surface of the skin we find when we have been doing nothing much more rigorous than sleeping on the sofa on the back porch. Imagine if we unmade such decisions. If we valued them the way we value turquoise. Or shut them up in a container that looks on the outside as if it had been painted by a person of genius. But contains on the inside just a pile of rubbish. Nylon stockings, stretched and mutilated through overuse. Pomegranates. I'd sample such delicacies as though, in reality, they belonged to the mind. As though they might stop hanging in the air like so many airplanes and remind us finally of why the planet seems always to be tilting in one direction.

#### An Unconditioned Totality

Sight is only half the dilemma. We construct what isn't there at the cost of tearing down what is. When the image turns out to be entirely cerebral, a cloak thrown over the geometry of mind, we stand back in amazement. We dither and malign and ultimately fuse what has no natural juncture. No one will want to purchase what we've made then, but someone might be willing to display it in a front window. When the air is turning cold. And there are people

lining up outside the station to have a chance at concert tickets. Some of them read Ginsberg out loud to pass the time. And some of them even seem to think it makes sense. Explaining this apostrophe and that image as if they were part of the family. Older cousins whose stories would make a perfectly viewable film starring that actor who has made a career playing the everyman. The senator from Ottumwa. The cuckold so torn up by his discoveries, he hasn't time anymore for hygiene.

#### Awash in the Inflorescence of Scandinavian Band Music

Who would have thought the elemental things would obey our commands that readily? Would attempt to slink away humiliated rather than stand up to our derision? It's the same sequence you might remember from the film *Gentle Ben*, only without the grizzly bear in it. And all the people. Especially those who knew what they were talking about. Who had been, obviously, to graduate school at some point in the recent past, and who couldn't hide the fact any more than they could walk on water when asked to by the elderly women in the bank lobby. This sort of embarrassment never does anyone any good, believe me, as it tends to sink into the soul like mercury and never come out again. It

carries its own ill will about proudly on its bosom like an army medal that got pinned there by accident. And I know what you're thinking – these slights and exaggerations, these unfortunate attempts at mercy, are really not something we should be bothering our heads over. If only because we lost our heads in the war. Not literally, of course. But not figuratively, either.

#### Why the Syrx was Sacred to Pan

The tears taste different somehow. As if they'd been extracted, reduced to the basest element. Drawn with the left hand. And then cauterized. Seasons make themselves scarce because they know they will be called on at some point to justify their reactions. To explain why they hopped from one porch to the next without bothering to warn the occupants ahead of time. These latter hold their arms straight and stiff beside their bodies. And their mouths are pencil-drawn lines straight across. Exhibiting ferocity, I suppose. Or a grim self-reliance of the kind we read about now and then in anthologies devoted to the transcendentalists. Or the letters home from men who found themselves trapped in the mountains just when there was plenty of water to be had by all. And a low hum

came out of the sky at night. It seemed some enormous machine was responsible for turning the heavens about in the sky. And the gears and the mechanism were hidden just out of sight behind the thresher and the row of shacks that sprung up over a course of about a month, like a bunch of mushrooms. Or those rumors that remind us it is not right to run off with someone else's wife.

#### The Soul Alone Lives with Its Flesh in Heaven

We understand there are principles at work that aren't abstract in any way. They are principles with a name and a personality. With a tendency to insist on their own importance to such an hysterical degree, we have no choice but to ignore them. To bring them back down to earth, so to speak, and teach them a lesson in humility and time management. The focus shifts from the tree-line to the creatures that call that place home, small mammals mostly that may have been catalogued previously by science, but no one can locate that information. It's as if someone purposefully tried to hide it, broke in and set about moving the files from one place to another, switching the organizational principle from alphabetic to something less obvious – like weight in grams. Or similarity in appearance

to celebrities known for their television roles in the 1970's. But since becoming so reclusive as to cause concern among their family and friends. Assuming, of course, they haven't been chased away through belligerence. Through a fear of communicable diseases.

### Hand-Wringing About the Reality of Simulations

The guard at the door knows his obligation is to memory, not the present. Just as we are most likely to drive our cars off the shoulder and into a ravine when we are trying to hug the center line. Our reasons are of the kind that send one scampering over mountain peaks. And welding together pieces of scrap iron to make an image where no image is necessary. Where we'd prefer to think about things in the altogether abstract fashion that characterizes much of our discourse now that we've graduated high school. And we can't think of anything to match it in terms of intensity. Or that ability to paint the world as something solid, fixed. And therefore of limited value. It undermines every law of common sense and natural harmony that has become associated, over the years, with farming. And there are people on shore with their hands out as if begging for something to eat. Or trying to get your attention because



they think you handsome. They'd like to iron your clothes for you. They'd like to be remembered as those people who made a difference. But one so subtle as to barely escape the category of "Not worth mentioning". Or "Worth mentioning, but not worth dwelling on". In either case, you may be certain the glass in the windows won't last another generation. When you replace it, you'll be continuing a tradition that goes back at least a thousand years. To a time when there were no windows. A time when there was no time, in the modern sense. In that sense that requires time to take up space and pretend it is more complicated and interesting than it actually is.

The Deed it has Projected

That thing that scurries between houses, that takes the shadows with it as if they were pieces of fabric, has turned up again in the town by the river. Whenever the residents there get together to discuss what they are going to do about it, an argument breaks out that has very little to do with their original goals or intentions. We think we know what will happen next. But we don't operate as if being certain is necessary. For instance, you can iron your shirt and not care one way or another if it gets burned until after

the fact. After you have shown up at your in-laws with the mark on your sleeve and a boil on your chin. There is nothing you could have done about the latter, of course, but that's not the point. The point is we must find a way around our obstacles, self-imposed or no. Much the same way Solomon did when he ordered the use of the Shamir worm. Because iron tools were forbidden in the construction of the Temple, the Shamir came in handy, as it split any stone over which it crawled. And so there was the just the matter of wrangling to consider. The difficulties of working under a midday sun.

#### Fabliaux of Street Songs, Folksayings

Confirmation arrives uninvited, yet further proof the cosmos has been rented out for the foreseeable future. Has been turned over to those who have no business managing even a Laundromat. Who probably whisper to themselves in anticipation of conversations they are going to have. Or those they have had in the recent past, conversations that didn't go the way they wanted them to. And so they exact their revenge after the fact. Is this fair? We have trellises to set up. And debates to moderate. And when the power comes back on, we'll have lentils, of course, to prepare. But

none of that means we wish unidentifiable fibers to congregate on the surface of our adversaries' skin. And we could survive just fine without all those names borrowed from the middle ages. The terms repeated as if they had become verbal talismans of the sort you find posted occasionally on the walls of the corner bistro. The crowds drawn in from as far away as Tucson, murmuring so low, you think for a moment the sound belongs to the movement of the blood in your veins. And you are privileged just to hear it, just to catch the echo of it, the way children sometimes catch crayfish on the end of a sharpened stick.

#### On Self-Strangling Semiotics

I have been doing nothing but practice my whole life. And still, I have yet to move beyond the point of origin, of drawing up and reflecting in my head. The whole world has yet to get started. It has yet to step forward even a millimeter. But you – just look at the ease with which you tear at that bunny! The dead glossy gaze you give with your enormous eyes! It's like you are made of the very substance that is the opposite of doubt -- whatever that might be. As if you had been born fully-formed. And of adult stature.

Otherwise, you'd be left wondering why you have to keep sloughing off skin cells at such an alarming rate. Why you feel the obsessive need to study all those old novels.

*Eulalie & Squid* (Chippens Press, 2009)

Detached from the Aggregate

The silver seems to have been handed out by those who think Squid too reclusive. A man who doesn't understand his obligations to the park system. And the volunteers who patrol its borders. They have been reduced by quarantine and apathy. Turned into specters by the things they've seen. Tumblers lying about, cracked and empty. Leaves stamped with the spindly trails of mold growth. Or other otherworldly materials. Pretending to belong to this one. Squid has a lesson at twelve and another in the morning. But suspects he has already covered those chapters and will just be wasting his time. Besides, Eulalie won't give him credit for being somewhere crucial. For creating a part of his life that doesn't resemble all the others. She thinks him shackled to the wasp's nest. Straining away at the scent of alder. But that doesn't mean she'll just wave her hand and dismiss the project. He knows through hard experience she will take copious notes. And try to make him believe something he doesn't actually believe. Eulalie is tricky that way. She is constantly turning over on the floor. Peering up at him as if she has just come to the most sinister

realization. And she is waiting for the right moment to inform him of it. To pronounce it in short, clipped syllables.

I think Squid probably should have bought Eulalie the fish tank. He should have pushed it into the corner with a dolly. Rather than just expecting the winds to take care of things. They are almost always arriving just a minute too late. Disturbing sheets of paper. Carrying with them the sound of people trying to do the right thing. It is a sound that tends to be mistaken by the uninitiated for that of someone drowning. So far off shore there is little help, I suppose, available. Though not so far as to fail to register altogether.

The Center Alleges Something Against the Periphery Simply by its Existence

Squid resolves never to dig up the past again once it has been buried. He fears it the way some people fear the breaching of the levees. The inundation that calls out your name. The reasons for this are plentiful, but they are hard to distinguish. They huddle together in the basement of the mind like salamanders. Poorly insulated things hoping against hope for the weather to change. For the sun to find its way to a window. And toss its light on the floor like a

handful of confetti. Of course, there are the broom closets to worry about. And the passages cut off from the main body of the house. Passages where you have to crawl on your hands and knees. And even then there doesn't seem to be enough room. Until you exhale so forcefully it's hard to get the lungs to remember what comes next.

The bride reminds Squid of a mountain slope. An avalanche. The kind of terrain that only really exists on film or postcards. That draws men to their ruin without their realizing what is happening. He thinks the energy in the room has diminished a great deal and wants to know why people are still clinging to the walls. Still trying to find there some sort of antidote to the poison that seeps in while they aim their attention elsewhere. Suppose, for instance, you were to find a thousand dollars in a briefcase at the side of the road. And you buried the briefcase in your backyard. But the owner showed up a week later and said he had heard some rumors that concerned you. That seemed to put you in a bad light even when there was no light. When the shadows themselves seemed to have taken over the entire hemisphere. Would that excuse your behavior at the tavern later? The woman in the short sleeves tries to buy you a drink. And you say you don't drink anymore because the

taste of it reminds you of death, of the fact that there are places on the surface of the sun that are cooler than others. And if we were to try to find them with the unaided eye, we'd succeed eventually. But at what cost?

### Pell-Mell Between Great Events

The bus sits in a gulley. Because the parking lot was full, I suppose. Or because the gulley is protected on both sides from the wind. Still, there are the floods to watch out for. And the mites that get in under the door and torment your scalp for weeks at a time. Even the medication isn't up to its usual good works. Deciding instead to abandon the battlefield to its enemy and beat a retreat to the sound of fife and cymbals. Squid stops by with a handful of magazines. Heady, intellectual fare of the sort he knows Eulalie objects to. Her first reaction is, as always, something muted. A bending of the corner of her lips. Either up or down, he can't be sure. It is a movement so subtle as to warrant closer examination if you were to record it. But caught in the speed of contemporary events, in the actuality of the here and now, there is no way to determine which movement came first. Which direction the birds take when they are startled out of their slumber on the high



tension wires. She follows his eyes to the window where she sees men bent double over the fields across the street. Extracting various forms of plant or mineral materials from the soil. And she wonders if he is trying to re-direct her attention intentionally again. Trying to force her to forget what she had originally wished to say to him. Something about the obscenity of the hour. The inappropriate way he behaves when in the company of other adults. But she can't remember precisely what it was now because her memory is like one of those steam engines that used to pull freight cars over the mountains in black and white films. It functions slowly at first. And only later finds its momentum.

#### The Hermeneutic As If

Pick through the seaweed. The platters full of liverwurst. But know that I love you. It's not enough to request a place on the Board. You must earn it through hard work. And the regular manipulation of other people's bodies. Sometimes they appreciate this and sometimes they tell their relatives that you are not who you pretend to be. They suggest you were abducted by your babysitter and this trauma sits like an amphibian on your diaphragm. You can't chase it away with minerals, though there are plenty on the shelf that promise to bring relief. To allow us to put the pencils down

and contemplate what it is we've been writing. These moments never lead to anything spectacular. But they don't mark us as potential victims either. We just keep moving in the same direction, all together, like a flock of parrots.

The Term "Unmarried Adult Male" Applies as well to Tarzan

Eulalie examines the conclusions, tries to place them together one after the other just as though they represent something she knows they do not represent. Parts of a coherent entity. Armor forged of a singular substance and signed by its forger. A squiggle and an umlaut over a portion of it. All just barely discernible on the left heel. But reminding us nonetheless that you can't send your creations out into the world without some sort of recognizable identity and still expect them to come back to you at some point the way the pigeon is said to return to its roost even with the goshawk hard on its tail. And the magnetic fields disrupted by some arbitrary whim of the sun. I imagine she wants to know what Squid's name actually represents. Whether it is a real part of him or whether it has been attached by someone who had no clue, at the time, of what he would become. And who has since refused to find out.

It's like we don't even know where North Carolina is. And if we were to look for it on a map, we'd find that long, comforting shadow at the far edge and assume it is the place we are looking for and start our journey. But there is no one waiting on the other side. Just the same old expectation turned into grief and inanity. A dull throb that turns sometimes into terror when you find yourself hoisted several hundred feet in the air. How is it possible to continue? How is it possible to come down? Probably best to just remember things at that point. To conjure them in your head and ogle them as if they were riches the likes of which no one has seen since the time of Blackbeard. And his associates. Since the time the lights reflected like swordfish on the surface of the water. But then we remember where we are and that there is no escape. And we refuse to belittle the situation further by unlocking the imagination. Because, after all, what is it exactly? How do you know what to do with it, how to utilize it, without accomplishing what a million others have accomplished before?

#### A Most Spontaneous Élan

Eulalie remembers a time when Squid got so far out into the woods by himself, she was afraid he might never again return. And she chuckles at the memory of her relief. That

sense that she was somehow off the hook forever. That she would never again be called on to submit to someone else's scrutiny. She liked the freedom this afforded, the very real sense that you could climb the stairs as far as they go and not have to act as if you are having trouble catching your breath. Of course, all that was in the past, the way Fluoride is in the water. And there are people now who would tell her to abandon those days at the pier. At the waterfront itself. Where someone else can be trusted to draw faces on the planks. Can illuminate them with candles and risqué lyrics and start a career that might last longer than a few days. What right, she says when she is pulling the socks from her feet, what right do you have to inform on me that way? What right have you to include my friends in the list of potential enemies and then publish it in serial form? Honestly, sometimes I wish I had found your brother instead. Eulalie refers, of course, to their first rendezvous. The tension in the air like a handful of locusts. At most a dozen. There was no swarm. And she was disappointed by this. The way we are disappointed to this day that no one has managed to unearth the Ark of the Covenant.

### In a Hastily-Penned Cartoonist's Balloon

Eulalie fills out the report and considers sending it in to the proper authorities. But she's not entirely sure who they might be. And what would they do with the information that hasn't already been done a hundred times before? File it under a new symbol? Talk about it amongst themselves in low whispers? And eventually yield to the temptation to illustrate it with faintly erotic stick figures? No, the time has come to abbreviate every other word. To find her voice in the voice of the blue jay. Eulalie stands at the window, straining to hear. Straining to distinguish the high notes from the panic that seems to come out of nowhere. That seems so pure, in fact, it has no audible existence. It can't be reproduced or explained away as waves. And this she finds almost intolerable. The kind of thing that sends you to bed at night without the covers, without even a stole to keep you warm. And the next morning you are strangely thankful. As if the austerity of the experience was the whole of it. Was both meaning and insult wrapped into one. Like that story of the man who always managed to trip up his foes. While simultaneously banging away at something by Liszt.

Squid thinks the attention of the heart paltry. Something that moves from one place to another as quickly as a cold front. Registering along its path neither the fact of its own movement or the disruption caused by its presence. But convinced all along that it is a one and singular thing. Without cracks or boundaries. Without division inside or out. And following the instincts placed within it by some providence much like itself in make-up. A barrel with objects in it. Pickle brine. Left over umbrellas. Eulalie, for her part, thinks he is without substance. A diffuse and undifferentiated thing that wanders about the mountainside at night when she is sleeping. That tells complete stranger tales that have no point. Tales that suggest the world is one kind of thing and then turn around and suggest it is something else entirely. And the two views are not necessarily contradictory. But they can't stand in close proximity either without a fistfight ensuing, the sort of dustup that usually ends in violence being done both to the psyche and the mechanism of the elbow.

As the Total of the One is to the Total of the Other

Someone's going the wrong way. It's inevitable. The sooner we accept that the bargain is not really a bargain at all, but

a decoy, the sooner we can get back to the tales that nearly always begin in Bulgaria. We can grab up whatever celery is on the plate along the way. Just as if we won't know what the climax sounds like without such assistance. Without the ladders threatening to fall over at the slightest provocation. Eulalie throws innuendo over her shoulder like salt. And the fact that Squid does not lunge ought to buy him some respect among those who knew him when he was a boy. Who thought he would never find himself in this situation. The sedan stuffed to the roof with steam trunks and cans of albacore tuna. The radio tuned to whatever doesn't have any tympanis in it. This should tell us all we need to know. And if it doesn't, if we are still searching beneath the mattress deep into the following morning, that doesn't mean we are disabled in some crucial way. It just means we will not be given a place on the life raft, should matters come to that. Should the oceans start spilling over the sides of their containers. And running through the streets like domestic animals loose from their trailers. She finds his silence suspicious. The kind of thing that one wraps the body up in just when the body has become most vulnerable. When it is most likely to succumb to scrutiny. The heat of the Idaho sun. And if she is going to position herself correctly, she knows she must first determine where Squid

will be at any given moment. Next to the rollaway bed. On top of the statue of himself that was erected secretly, in the middle of the night, downtown. And when the reporters came to ask him about it, to all but accuse him of arranging the project himself, he scoffed in a voice that left little doubt of his guilt. But no one could put a finger on exactly why. Sure, there was the timbre of it. Weak and watery. The sort of thing one expects to hear from the tailpipe of a Buick. Or the mechanism of the pen when you are just about to sign your name. But you hesitate for a moment because you're not quite clear which line is the correct line. And which is liable to get you sent to the cabin in the piney woods. From which, it is rumored, no one ever comes back again. Where they ply you with soda crackers and fragments from the illiterate poets of Greece. Until you can no longer remember exactly why you turned your back on the old life. Why you lampooned it so cruelly in the pages of the phonebook.

But just try figuring it out without the assistance of the woman you love! Try scratching at the bricks on your own. It won't be but a matter of weeks before you are slinking back, defeated, into the corner of the garage.



Hunting up the gas cans for one final inhalation.

### Chilean Sea Bass is Really Just Patagonian Toothfish (1)

Squid thinks the lateness of the hour means something other than what he has imagined in the past. When fatigue crept up on him like an alligator. And there was a real sense in the air that what we experience is simply a delicate crust on the outside of something enormous. And mouth-watering. Or at least aromatic. That Eulalie goes to bed early is a sign, he supposes, that her patience has worn thin. Or that she is so fond of dreaming, she can't wait to get back there again and discover something about the dresser drawers. Something hidden and earth-shattering. The stash of diamonds an ancestor left behind just before she disappeared into the wilderness. A receipt for twelve gallons of gas. Ah! If only we could conjure those hours again! Those exquisite sounds by the bank of the river!

I know what Squid's up to, why he hauls the catfish ashore as if he is handling some sort of industrial poison. But really, the thought of holding one's nose before a cadre of women, and then expecting them to remain interested, to ask you about the tattoo on your forearm! It's too much. I remember once stumbling on a pair of scissors tossed

aside for no reason, it seemed, on a trail that snaked its way over the ridge of a mountain. And ended abruptly at a cliff. Below me there were buzzards circling in the mist. And you could just make out the tops of some evergreen trees. I always wondered who had been there before me. Who had decided it was no longer necessary to cut up scraps of paper. And leave them on the ground. It's the same sense of wonder that grips Squid when he hears Eulalie whispering on the phone in the next room. When he catches her looking off into the distance when they are out for a drive. Which way is she going, forward or back? Which would be the most delicious? Which cause him the most pain? They are questions Squid never tires of asking himself. As if they had appeared first in a sacred book. And his discovery of them now represents nothing short of an initiation.

#### Before the Ceremony Took Place

Our minds do not belong to us. We are not responsible for what occurs there most of the time. And if this should cause others melancholy, well then, we ought not to admit that it causes us some trouble too. Because once this secret gets on the wind, it weighs it down. It turns the wind into something that doesn't know where it is going. Or why it

wanted to go anywhere in the first place. Perhaps all indecision is a blessing handed down from the heavens the way dinner rolls get sent from one end of the table to the other. Everyone knows where they originated is more important, ultimately, than where they wind up. Of course, we don't know if Eulalie's eyes are open or closed. And if they are actually in-between, just slits showing the slightest bit of color and some of the sclera, then perhaps Squid is right to sulk after all. Because she is choosing to eliminate all but the minimum of sense impression. Just the vaguest outline of his head and arms. And her motivation is the same as it was when they met here previously. On a Tuesday perhaps. When the weather wasn't as fine, but the sense of possibility was much more acute than it is now. When they knew no more about each other than does a pair of snails. If only everything kept to its proper order like this, obeyed the chronology written out ahead of time, we wouldn't be so afraid to step out the front door. We wouldn't march to the post office with our hearts in our throats. And the manuscripts of our autobiographies tucked up under our arms. We'd let the world infect us with whatever nonsense it has kept brewing in the back room. And unleashes only when it is certain the time is not quite right for it. That its recipients will all but be destroyed. Squid

sees Eulalie's outline in the ice on the window. And knows then that even mistakes can go terribly wrong. Can make you long for the contests that used to pop up in the back pages of the magazines. Promising deliverance from a life with no boundaries. With just a few wide open pastures to hide in when there was no real reason to be hiding from anyone. Only a bland, inimitable sense of the futility of all things.

#### Laid on the Tongue, an Irritant

Eulalie digs the number out of her purse and repeats it to him five or six times without his ever exhibiting the first sign of comprehension. And isn't it always this way? she thinks as Squid pulls her to him. And wraps his arms around her head, mock-aggressively. As if to suggest that he might some day, if he were feeling like it, pull her head from her neck as easily as one separates the wrapper from a piece of candy. First, the arrival. And then the administration of certain pleasantries designed as much to fill up space as to communicate anything noteworthy or valuable in themselves. And if he is in a hurry, there will inevitably be some sort of monologue. A treatise on the spirit without his ever using the word spirit. Or seeming ultimately to know what he would denote by the term if he were to use it. But

she understands anyway. The way you can understand what is happening in the steel towns two counties over without ever having to go there personally. Or pick up a newspaper. Sometimes these things just have a habit of getting on the wind. And dispersing themselves about in the atmosphere. So that those who live in Mindanao find themselves uttering phrases current as well in the city of Portland, Maine. With the only difference being one of translation, of course. And perhaps a hint of menace or barbarity found in the one but not so much the other. Due, I suppose, to geography. Or the promise of a Sunday thaw.

#### Too Much Faith in the Captain's Plan

The rowboats block the exit to the bay. Something smells like dogs after there has been a race from one end of the continent to another. Though the dogs themselves do not take part. They bound around at the periphery. Hoping to get noticed by whoever lingers there. Whoever has stacked the rocks on top of one another and refers to that structure as a monument. I doubt there is any material here for reflection. Any leftovers of the wedding cake. After all, the whole world has learned to do without romance. And the sore knuckles that accompany it. Eulalie recalls the rear-guard action they took, the seemingly endless banter that

turned out to be just so much grasping at tuning forks. And scratching outlines into the soft flesh behind the knee. It's possible other people think in terms that have no correlation with the outside world. That reduce it to some sort of plaything. Like the rubber pomegranate in a baboon's cage. But when pressed to explain why they need this secret code, this longing for hiding places with faux-Etruscan pottery and ergonomic furniture, the most they can muster is a croak of some sort. A bleating like that you'd expect of mountain ibex. When they are far from their mountains. Perhaps this means we will see the likes of them again some day. In the garden section. Running their thumbs over the hoses. Perhaps we will forget the whole thing ever happened. And lower ourselves discreetly behind the blind before the waterfowl approach and the insults ring out. Or maybe Eulalie is correct in claiming the bottom of the feet are no place to start experimenting. You have to begin at the top of the head. And work your way down. If you wish to avoid the plight of the young wife who sees her husband adorned with the leaves of the Gamb'u tree. A sure sign that he has been visiting the garden of the Vidyadharas. Hoping to secure there his basest desires. But then, who hasn't taken a detour now and then? Searched for some replica of the month before? But found instead a

tingling in the earlobes? A pain in the coccyx that can only be described as tolerable? Better to let the bouillabaisse simmer. Better to address your concerns to the man on the balcony who is playing his oboe with a reckless, primitive abandon. Just as if he were trying to conjure himself from the surf.

### Teach the Dominies

The librarians turn up for their session. And you forget why it was you thought you had a chance in this world. That the foreboding that used to hang about your shoulders when you were a kid was anything less than a message straight from the source. A kindness done to you as a favor by someone who has no real need to grant favors to anyone. He is in a position, of course, to know why the storm drains are placed at regular intervals. And what the future looks like when the future looks like anything at all. Porcelain jars, for instance. Or the cracks in the sidewalk that appear out of nowhere one night after a thaw and the ground has become saturated. That's the point at which the crickets decide, apparently, that they have had enough of announcing their presence to all and sundry. And yet, at the

same time, they aren't too sure of their options. They can't even agree on what silence is.

Squid had hoped Eulalie would recognize him anyway. And pretend that she was frightened. Hold her hands up before her face. And let out one of those screams they seem to have perfected in the silent films of the 1920's. What we wouldn't give now to have grown into our mannerisms that effortlessly! As if they had originated somewhere in the body. Had grown and matured from something no larger than a grain of sand. And the process was so mysterious, they don't even speak of it anymore at the seminary. They lower their eyes. And shake their heads. And they walk off toward the garden gate. Where they will re-convene, of course, in the evening. And make their feelings known through gestures of the hand. And a mute imitation of the swaying of nearby trees.

From Golgothas of Ordure and Rust

Eulalie leaves the back door open just in case he is planning to surprise her. To show up wearing the poncho she stitched together by hand. But she knows her chances are getting slimmer by the minute. Squid will never grow substantial. He will never abandon the periphery where he



likes to blend in. She thinks we are all some sort of fiend when you get right down to it. When you peel back the layers and the disguises we have picked up along the way. As if they had been no more than pieces of scrap tin thrown into a heap in the corner. And we fashioned them into whatever seemed necessary at the time. But strikes us now as unnecessary, I suppose. Or necessary, but not entirely so. Like socks on a warm day. Or the postage stamps that have a picture of someone famous on them. Or notorious.

Eulalie spoons out the last of the gelatinous mass from the bottom of the container and holds it up to the light to try to determine once and for all whether she has been wasting her time waiting for someone, anyone to say her name when she is sleeping. The signs are in the substance, where they always are. But she doesn't know how to read them. And she can't bring herself to invent the science of it here and now. Can't imagine anyone trusting the conclusions she comes to no matter what they are based on. She knows Squid will simply hide behind that face he has constructed from the same materials as his real one. As if the one were somehow identical to the other even though they display diametrically opposed features. And why shouldn't it be so? she realizes, with a start. Why shouldn't

he lather up the inside with his tongue? And find that it stings a little. It gets frightfully warm, and even begins to taste like the back of one's hand. The same miniscule pieces of grit. The hint of apricot coming, no doubt, from the lotions one applies in the morning.

#### Titter at the Mention of Lamartine

She must fight the malaise that descends whenever she approaches the bed, must remind herself there are reasons we can't succumb. But these reasons are never readily apparent, and when he touches her ear with his mouth, she recoils without meaning to, almost as if there is a nerve center there originally created to warn one of the presence of adders. To ensure an immediate response and therefore at least another day of life. He considers her body the sort of thing one should thank Heaven for and wets his fingers in preparation. But all along, there is a place in the back of his mind that remains unconvinced, that chews noisily on a piece of glass and considers the unstable personality of Tiberius. The fits of melancholy. The intermittent loss of reason. If only we knew where the switch is, how to throw it in a timely manner and still find a way to make it seem as if we were in the other room. She follows trails through groves that haven't been named officially, but which carry

the names given them by children and others in the vicinity. People who spend great quantities of time exploring them or just passing through in search of some further grove where they can expect a moment or two of solitude. Maybe a run-in with a stranger. Something memorable before it even happens. Something arranged ahead of time in the mind where each detail, each caress and dumb-show, is worked out, tested and refined, by that entity responsible for forming the world out of the raw materials sent its way on the nerves. It delights in anonymous pleasures above all else, relishes the arcane and the unseemly as if it had been raised improperly. As if it had been privy to all manner of inappropriate conversations at the dinner table when it was growing up. And I don't wish to suggest by this there was a more respectable alternative. That we may blame bad luck or faulty circumstances, the poor decision making of a nearby adult. No, we elicit the effects best by imagining the cause, but have no desire to prove it this way. In fact, to further illicit the impossible, we might wish to understand the methods of this reservoir of bad taste, this conductor of flesh buried in the flesh itself, by analogy with the seashore. Or the armies marching overland from their base in the mountains a thousand miles away. But what's the point, she thinks, as she inches ever closer to that place where she will

move her hands a certain way. And will be no more conscious of it than one is conscious of breathing when nothing is obstructing it. Even here, the malaise is both unmovable and unendurable, the curse and shanty of her life. And if she escapes it momentarily through the insistence and the prodding of that part of him that resembles the unadulterated will itself, it is only by magnifying it until the boundaries themselves become unending. They stretch to the furthest corners of the room and refuse to slow their progress even then. They run for the empty cosmos in all directions, like light.

*Chilean Sea Bass is Really Just Patagonian Toothfish (2)*  
(Differentia Press, 2010)

The sounds of afternoon traffic are sufficient to get him in the mood to touch her. Even the sound of nothing happening at all will suffice. Sound itself, then, is the problem. If only we could harness it the way we harness mules when it's time to bring the sugarcane to market. We'd know where to begin. We'd have the quarry laid out on a table. And have merely, then, to pick it apart -- turn it over and stick in the pins -- to mark out where one portion begins. And another one ends. Where the names of things suffice. And where they become a burden. Is this mean-spirited? Sure, but when have we accepted anything less? How often are the pantomimes transcended by juveniles asking all the wrong questions? Getting up from their seats and circulating about the room? They know something we don't. The value of the atmosphere. The word play that gets the wisdom teeth aching thirty years and more after they've been removed. They serve as concrete stand-ins for the larger concept and as such ought to be commended. Ought to be given a day on the calendar. But there are always objections. And when we list these on a piece of paper, it takes twenty-five minutes just to get through those that

start with the letter V. The drums suggest something we haven't been able to formulate. The sound drops from the clouds like locusts, and seizes up. It becomes something you point at with your fingers. Something you taste on the tongue. The sun follows us through the fields, along the shortcut that occurs to us spontaneously, as if it were planted in our minds by something divine. Something with an agenda. The snow is high on all sides, towering above us in close approximation of actual topographical realities. Hillocks and other deformations of the otherwise gentle earth. It is as if we have found the other part of the torn parchment. The key to the pronunciation of all terms. The explanation for the wavy lines and other additions obviously drawn on afterward by shaky hands. By people frightened of what they were doing. Maybe this means we won't be hearing the trumpet come morning. Or maybe it just means we have protectors in high places but they don't wish to make our acquaintance. They would prefer to be left alone. Which is our response precisely. We don't care if there is some purported connection. We have no more use of portraits adorning the walls of our houses than we do of shoes with no heels on them. Or bread that has grown moldy because it was left on the kitchen counter, outside its plastic container, and every time the people in the house

pass it, they assume someone else is responsible for re-packaging the bread and putting it away. If only because someone else was responsible for removing it from the pantry and its package to begin with. Still, our minds are nothing if not pliable and our loved ones know just the right ploys. They learned them over the years spent in our company. The way we know not to jump up and down on the grate in the sidewalk simply by examining the definition of the word “grate”. And combining that with our inherent understanding of the way gravity works. Or at least the way it is supposed to work when you read about it in a magazine. The same, say, where we discover a mountain of oysters has appeared unexpectedly on the coast of some faraway country. As if placed there by someone who wishes to frighten the inhabitants without using any words. We suspect the image is supposed to say something anyway, pronounce it with the same audacity one finds in the cascading waterfall. Or the bar codes on unwrapped packages of liver. Several species of oyster, in fact, make up this mountain and the residents can have their pick. They can sort them by height or patterns on the fabric laid out on the ground so as to keep the shells from getting muddy. They can listen to someone lecture from seven o’clock in the evening until such time as everyone has stopped

listening. Which usually amounts to ten minutes. Though occasionally someone arrives without a dossier, without so much as a piercing on her lip, and delivers the sort of paean to learning and excavation, to baring one's shanks, that those in the audience have often dreamed about after consuming too much red wine. Once, I remember there was a heckler on the beams that run the length of the auditorium, and he wore a fool's cap and kept ringing the bells at the end with the motion of his head. But this didn't seem entirely intentional or even out of place. Just one of those things that happen because something else happened before it. And a chain was set up. In fact, the heckler seemed to think it was this chain itself that needed to be overhauled. Needed to disappear from the scene the way the mountain of oysters all but disappears from view when the sun sets directly behind it. In the sea. And the Babylonian worldview is replaced by any number of others less concerned with water. And how it comes to be both above and below us all at the same time. Falling, for instance, as rain from cracks in the glass dome overhead. Where the stars and the sun are expected to parade themselves from one end to the other every twelve hours or so. Though, if they were to miss a shift, who really would notice? Who would call out to their gods in lamentation?



Probably we need to spend more time ourselves boning up on where everything should be at any given moment. And what we are supposed to do once we realize the eyeglasses on the end of our nose, say, are the wrong prescription. They make everything seem unnaturally vivid, both warm and cold. With the boundary between these states clearly visible. It slithers about like a snake. Or a belly dancer who herself has studied the locomotion of serpents. Has written a children's book about it, in fact, and hopes some day to find an illustrator. Someone who will know how to capture complex movement in a very few brushstrokes. Without, of course, having to be told how to do it. Or that the loans will come due on the very day she is visiting the pyramids. We don't know, of course, of the existence of the pyramids until after we visit, because they are mostly underground. It's said you can see the very tip of one next to a rusted out silo, if you squint just right and if the sunlight is falling at a beneficial angle. If not, you can look at the drawings rendered by those who have seen something there and have even studied what it means. That they create that meaning themselves from line to line, that they interpret without ever realizing they do so, is something we'll leave for the next round of discussion. In the meantime, enjoy your punch. Down the road, another group of attractive

people is loitering around the back entrance to the one restaurant in town where you're still allowed to smoke cigars. It's unclear if they are expecting a handout or if there is an impromptu protest taking place. How odd that we can't make up our minds about what we are seeing even as we are seeing it, about what constitutes the actual when only our sense organs are involved. These organs seem to have been composed of other, more primitive organs that themselves arose from still more primitive structures the function of which we can no longer determine. Maybe they had no function at all but were simply accumulations of matter that began to look like something vital the way clouds tend to look like human beings engaged in various activities even when there is no one present to observe them (the clouds, I mean, and not the people, though the distinction is not as important as it seems). Do they give a prize for brevity? What does it look like? I prefer the sand dunes, the tree trunks caught between them, their tops sheared off by whatever force shapes the landscape. Or laughs at it. Whatever force pretends we are of interest when in fact we only register when there is something amiss. When it feels threatened by our dirty words. We snake our way through valleys, trying to seem as inconspicuous as it is possible to be with ammunition belts

on both shoulders and our volumes of Walpole sticking out of our vests. Please don't inform me of any alternatives. I've been growing an inch or more every year since they started enriching the oats, started cataloguing the frequency of the thunderstorms as if they hoped to find there some pattern like that the geese follow when they are over the Upper Platte. Or that creature termed leviathan, cause of social sterility because it is identified with Egypt and Babylon. Just as if these places weren't already desirable in themselves. Destinations one discovers while trolling the brochures at the truck stop. Before the evening meal of pancakes and ice water settles and you are off again, searching for whatever it is that makes us want to continue living even when it is more reasonable just to give in. To sink under the weight of our exoskeletons like diatoms. This is a common enough occurrence to have been given a special designation by those who study such phenomena. And so feel an almost irresistible need to make them up. To find the telling illustration in every street sign and garbage can they pass on their way to work. And every wink and sneeze and obscene gesture aimed their way once they get there. I take the envelope to where Eulalie is lounging on a deck chair, the sun tangled up in the trusses of her hair, bits of it at any rate, struggling to get free. She takes in elements as if they

were junk food, redistributes them to the weaker parts of her skin. Wouldn't we like to know how multiplication really works? How it takes one thing and turns it into something else right before our very eyes? As if the trick consisted in manipulating the wiring in our heads rather than simply recognizing the fundamental properties of the world. Eulalie has been raised to recite these, to list them like so many state capitals. It is a bravura performance, to be sure, and every time I try to goad her into performing, she puts out her hand instead. Reaches for those places on my person most likely to reciprocate. To find in contact a momentary resolution to the problem of evil. Though, to be honest, it's not a problem I have been forced to face directly. Other than the occasional gastric discomfort. Or a feeling like my tongue is stuck in slow motion. How do we discern the truly essential ingredients? Are we supposed to understand that the big questions haven't even occurred to us yet, despite all that time we spent in our twenties trying to impress the women who carry a copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* around with them like a purse? Well, maybe there weren't that many, but certainly Eulalie knows why I keep showing up here, my mouth full of cynical reformulations of the things we hear on TV. She gets out of the chair, straightens the necklace that hangs from her

neck, a sharp and intricate thing that always strikes me as potentially deadly. The kind of thing that people join secret organizations just to acquire and decode. And who knows, maybe Eulalie has another life I know nothing about. One where the sun is not the thing that settles on her skin like oil. But a human being perfectly capable of holding a rational conversation. Or, by turns, losing its mind entirely. Shouting incoherent oaths and accusations at people who are just trying to get to work. Temperatures range at that time of day with the attempts at logic. They begin low and stay that way until someone can answer five questions in a row. Without assistance. And with barely any food in his pocket. We wish to remain as impartial as possible, but there are always alliances cropping up just when we had begun to assume that no one was actually talking to anyone else. They get their feelings hurt and pout like sea bass. But this is just the first in a series of reversals noted for their almost supernatural character and timing. Uncanny things of the sort that induced Theophrastus once, in penning his portrait of the superstitious person, to describe a man coming across a snake. And calling on the god Sabazius if the serpent is red. While electing to erect a temple to it instead at the side of the road if the reptile turns out to be the “sacred snake”. Though no one is sure exactly which

species was given that moniker. Probably we ought to liberate ourselves from all backsliding in our research and just deem everything sacred in one way or another. But there are rules against looking too closely at what might otherwise scare you to death. These rules were formulated for the protection of our psyches. But we weren't consulted ahead of time and so resent them. How else can you explain the sarcasm? The parakeets? And the signs fashioned hastily with crayons and other forms of contaminant scraped up at the last minute when we were slogging our way through bogs just to arrive on time? When we were singing ballads composed in the dead ball era. Jaunty tunes with Honus Wagner as the hero, commentary on his penchant for raising chickens. At the expense of everything else. Who doesn't love a myth like this that raises itself up from the mire by freeing first its elbows and then insisting that whoever discovers it must put his name to paper? Must sign his name in bold letters and take whatever consequences may then arrive. Four or five gorgeous women on the upper deck of a bus. Their parasols opening and closing in unison, like clams. Imagine those in the windows looking down on the scene from their rarely used studios, checking their own pulses, dabbing at their foreheads with rags smelling faintly of turpentine. I'm sure

Eulalie knows what the soft part of the hand feels like when it is reaching for you beneath the covers. When the rain is beating against the window near the foot of the bed. And all you can remember about the previous day is the aroma of the stroganoff. The ingredients culled from the deck of the ship when nobody was looking. There are frogs with horns on the tops of their heads. If you push on these with a certain insistent pressure, taking care to injure neither yourself nor the amphibian, something remarkable starts to happen. If we were in the movies, it would be accompanied by the sound of a single piano. And a longish address that would start the process all over again. This suggests we don't know why there is anything at the end of our fingertips. Why the world sounds sometimes like it was constructed with hammers. And left to fend for itself in a neighborhood where the streetlights are so distant and predictable, they might as well not be streetlights at all, but salmon. Or memos with no real information in them. Just empty pages passed from one hand to the next until something starts to rub off. This is why Eulalie rarely leaves the house without a bottle of syrup in her coat pocket. A miniature blackberry brand they give you for free sometimes at the restaurant. And you don't know if you are supposed to swallow it right off. Or parcel out the contents

over a matter of months. It couldn't hurt to be frugal. Who knows? The injury to your neck might heal. And then everyone will know that you are not to be trifled with. They will see the potential repercussions ahead of time. Looming there like a stranger in the window. And they will ask themselves what have I done to deserve this? Why are there any choices at all? It took a while to see the joke in the same light we did. To understand what exactly was at stake. Squid discovered you can't sing off-key and expect people to acknowledge your presence in the street the following day. Try telling that to the man who dresses as well as the rest. But isn't allowed into the primary circle. He too probably has limbs, and even some organs, made in a factory somewhere. And his ideas are no more preposterous, ultimately, than are theirs. But it's a matter of pride with him, really. This perpetual keeping to the side. It's the same sort of thing that invites you to chase women when you know the result ahead of time. When they are so fleet of foot and phenomenologically-minded, not a single compliment from the store of such you keep written down and stacked in a trunk in the basement is apt to stop them in their tracks. Not an ice cream bar. Not even a telegraph set with the cobwebs knocked off for good measure. Eulalie puts her lipstick on in the morning, harkens back to her own



days at the easel. A fire to be known, if not internationally, then at least in the neighborhood. She'd hike the twenty minutes each way to the liquor store. And pray all the while that someone would stick his head out a window of one of the apartments above the street. And ask her something that had been bothering him for weeks. She would know the answer immediately, without really having to think. The kind of thing that earns one grudging admiration. That causes people to fear you without their being able to express that fear in words. But, of course, no one lived in those apartments. And so no one accosted her from above. Some people waited until she was far enough away on the sidewalk to seem like one of those common mirages caused by convection. By the air rising in wraith-like patterns from off the surface of the earth. Even the beach has about it a feeling of grim business. Of turning one thing into another against its will. We find ourselves confronted with evidence of every conceivable shape and texture. Dimes and dried bits of seaweed scattered about almost too haphazardly. As if someone has arranged them with deception in mind. Wishes us to believe the hand of someone intelligent is wholly absent. To get at something like the truth, Squid suggests they swim out beyond the entrance to the bay. Look for something slightly untamed, a stretch where the

current begins to address you directly in a foreign tongue.  
And the harder you try to avoid that conversation, the more  
insistent it becomes.

*Five Perfect Solids* (White Knuckle Press, 2011)

I imagine whoever made you studying where to place your ears, plotting coordinates with a well-trained, yet anxious eye. Could there be a second chance? What adhesive would allow for removal and repositioning without leaving a mark, without blemishing the skin above the neck, above the tendons in the neck that stretch and bend?

\*

Kepler appears two months before he was supposed to, in December 1571, and, as a consequence, is sickly from the start. He suffers ailments we can't imagine unless, of course, we have suffered from them as well. It's this back and forth between the actual and the imaginary, between what can be seen and what has been seen in the past but is no longer visible, that makes us wonder if perhaps we're straddling some kind of fault line, some schism in the fabric of the place we reside that otherwise might go unnoticed.

\*

Windows surround us to a height of eighty feet. You can't see in because the windows are tinted but I'm sure it's possible to see out of them because otherwise why would

they be there? The sun makes us feel as if we have just escaped some enclosure, some cocoon that kept us moist and cool. I can feel other people's eyes on us though I can't describe the feeling. You say it probably has to do with the light that jumps from the windows to where we are sitting and back again like echoes in an empty room.

\*

Kepler turned to the Copernican theory not out of any deep-seated appreciation for the mathematics involved but because it corresponded with some metaphysical necessity that rested inside him like a bone. His first attempts at the essay form brought him to discuss more than just the heavens, of which he was still by and large ignorant. Just as we are ignorant of what it must be like to picture the heavens as just so much material floating about a mere mile or two above our heads.

\*

You remember when the snow was falling and we had twelve hours to kill and not a watt of electricity and everywhere you looked the walls seemed to close in around us like a tomb, but we had a candle and our bodies and they worked together, this light and this flesh, until everything was wave and the dismantling of the wave, the breaking it

apart so as to refashion it again and then send it scurrying back out again into the darkness?

\*

The inspiration came from the number five, the total known planets at the time, and led Kepler to the five perfect solids, the Earth being positioned inside the dodecahedron so as to allow Mars to orbit around it, and inside the orbit of the Earth an icosahedron to contain Venus. Perhaps it is this element of containment that inspires us still so that we frequently look to the shape of things as if they were the principle that makes the things what they are. As if the boundaries were the equivalent of the substance itself and not simply that which holds it in.

\*

Your eyes light themselves from within like stars. They require little in the way of combustible material, require nothing, in fact, beyond that which is inherent in the words spoken to them and the words that escape their centers because all things must travel out from the center or else they are not truly things in the strictest sense of that term. They are ephemera.

\*

If his system corresponds too closely to that of Copernicus, Kepler claims this is a strike against it and reason enough to start over. He accuses Copernicus of taking his figures and observations from various sources and manipulating them to fit his system. Kepler does the same when it comes to the moon. He is willing to place it within the orbital shell of the Earth. Or outside it. Or, if need be, half in and half out, like your tongue when you think you have said something clever.

\*

When I am not sitting by your side in the hot sun or in the car or on the bed when we have found time to be alone and no one is watching because there are no windows, I long to feel whatever it is that moves beneath the skin move and transfer itself from your skin to mine, or attempt to, the attempt being sufficient because it is that which reminds me I am not, at least for the moment, alone.

\*

Kepler was certain the sky not only did something to us, but that it would be possible to discover the mechanism that allowed the sky to operate upon our lives and even to extrapolate from that mechanism toward an understanding

of what some might refer to as sacred knowledge. I experience the same sort of vertigo when you are standing before me, gazing at the exhibit which contains artifacts from Micronesia. Your skirt is long and intricate and falls over your lower body in such a way as to suggest that body.

\*

We won't admit each thing is part of another thing and that the whole of it is neither larger nor more significant than the parts of which it is made. Who doesn't long to wander by rivers, to clamber over fallen trees with the woman who has come to haunt his sleep at night, who makes him think of the wilderness places between cities simply by lifting her eyes, by inviting the whole of the night sky in? The Pleiades and the ascendant Venus?

\*

Kepler had intended to reconcile any contradiction between the Copernican system and the teachings of Holy Scripture but he was warned away from the task by the head of the theological seminary at Tuebingen, presumably because everyone thought he would botch the job. He would assume a knowledge of the heavens that you or I could never possess because we spend little time gazing at

them. And when we do, we are inevitably disappointed—  
even bored—by what we find.



*Variations on a Theme by Spinoza* (red ceilings press, 2011)

An emotion is a confused idea in that it arises from the mind but believes itself subject to the body. Any idea I have of a body arises not, per Spinoza, from the idea I have of my own body, but that I have of yours. The resulting emotion is no more idea than it is confused. If I remain passive before the emotion that is the memory of your body (and not the body itself) I do so only until such time as that memory is no longer just memory, but the fact of your body like the fact of my own.

\*

When we claim the body exists in a greater or lesser perfection than was previously the case, we do not mean that the mind compares your body to what it was in the past, but that the idea of your body is as of something that contains more or less reality than it did the first time the mind conceived of it. If not for this mechanism, your body would cease to exist. Should your body or the idea of your body be allowed to cease to exist, all other bodies, or ideas of bodies, would cease to exist.

\*

Anyone wishing for illustration will be disappointed because there is no precedent and no parallel. We are original to this position and no others can follow. You may imagine however the line inside a circle. At the intersection we are the rectangles that are both suggested and separated from one another. The number of such is infinite. But they do not exist except in relation to the circle that contains them. Let two of these infinite lines exist, D and E. The ideas of both exist in terms of the circle and the rectangles that are formed. The ideas are different, are somehow other than the ideas of the other rectangles which are not formed but merely suggested. We are the rectangles and the ideas of the rectangles. But we are not those created by D and E. We have not yet been created.

\*

I wonder out loud if we are really going to spend the next sixty years together, forever reminiscing about the preceding five or ten years and getting under each other's skin like parasitic wasps. But of course I don't have that much time and you have all the time in the world because you don't view time as something that passes. It is something that hangs in the air and rotates so that if you wait around long enough it will come back again to where it was when you first started. This doesn't mean that you

are worried overly about what will happen next, but it doesn't mean that you are in denial either. It just means that the worlds we occupy at precisely the same time are merely parallel and analogous.

\*

**P22:** If another person, in our imagination, provides the beloved with pain then that person provides us with pain and an opportunity to exercise our hatred which is looking for any reason whatsoever to get up off the couch. Spinoza would have it the same applies to pleasure, the left side of the equation being a mirror image of the right side, so that the pleasure applies to both sides. This is of course a blunder, the proposition of a man without attachments. For that which gives the beloved pleasure, assuming that we did not provide it, of necessity provides us with pain. The mirror is broken, usually with our own knuckles. Or an object we grasp and hurl in its direction. **Proof:** Imagine the last time you discovered the machinations of the beloved. Recall how you discovered them. The whispers of those you know. The unguarded messages in a phone.

\*

**Corollary to P22:** You and I are the exception to rules handed down to others the way a man's genetics hands him

a square jaw or a propensity to say one thing and mean another. Whatever pleasure you are afforded, affords me pleasure to a lesser degree so long as someone else has provided the pleasure. In this, if in nothing else, Spinoza is vindicated. You may imagine him grinding lenses and contemplating the future, finding us there with a smile on his face. Or at least a nod of the head before glass bits get, yet again, into the corneas of his eyes. You may not imagine however the intensity of the pleasure provided when I am providing it. Another way of stating this is that pleasure is like the orbit of a planet inasmuch as it slows and lessens the further away it gets from the prime source of gravitation, which is of course the sun. What man, then, does not equate himself with Apollo, with the sun? And what man does not know, somewhere deep inside – this knowledge like a fairly important organ, the spleen, say – that he is deluding himself?

\*

One emotion can not be overcome except by a contrary emotion of equal or greater strength. That which I feel for you is the emotion but it can not be overcome. Therefore it exists prior to and not within or counter to all other emotions. Daring and fear are on the same plane and

therefore equal and can be conceived of as cancelling one another out when the man who is free applies the strength of mind necessary to confront the one with the other. As the primary emotion can not be cancelled out in this fashion, it stands to reason that I am not a free man. Or if I am a free man, I am no longer free when confronted with the primary emotion, which is to say when I am confronted with the fact of you. The free man's fleeing danger is the same as his overcoming it through strength. But only as concerns daring or fear. I can neither flee nor overcome the fact of you nor the idea of you which is just as tangible as the fact. Accordingly, if I were a free man I would, under these circumstances, endeavor to make myself a slave.

\*

**P18** If two or more bodies have acted upon the human body in the past, the human mind necessarily recalls both bodies when given the chance to imagine one of them. Your body acts upon the mind and allows no recall of two or more bodies acting upon the human body other than itself. In this, the human body is shown to be dependent on your body in the same way the human mind is dependent on its capacity for recall and imagination to forge itself as something called mind rather than something else. Your

body acts upon the mind the way two or more bodies act upon the human body, that is to say as a totality.

\*

A single emotion hinders the mind more fully than does two or more working in conjunction, and is therefore to be feared the more. We suffer less from the many than the one, the numerous causes working together to water down the effect. The emotion you evoke is multi-faceted and ought, by Spinoza's reckoning, to be the less detrimental for its variety, but the emotion and the variety do not now communicate. The mind is less passive as concerns that emotion which causes it to regard several different things at once (say, the hair resting on your shoulders and the way you say "Serendipity") than it is with a single emotion which keeps the mind engrossed. All emotion may be masked, however, in a single emotion, and therefore inspire fear equal to that which is inspired by the truly singular emotion.

\*

From your divine nature follow infinite attributes and infinite things. Everything that can come from infinite attributes comes from your divine nature by virtue of it being divine and not something humble or demeaning

except inasmuch as these attributes follow from the infinite as well. The proposition should be apparent to anyone who touches your lips with his lips or who studies the lack of certain hues in the sky when you are abroad. The attributes each contain infinite essences having as they do their origins in the infinite things themselves originating in you.

**Cor 1** It must follow that you are the first and efficient cause of all things stemming from the sensual intellect.

**Cor 2** All causation having its origins in the sensual intellect may well be accidental.

\*

If we consider quantity as an abstract property stemming from the sensual intellect, then we discover its divisibility and assign it parts such as the lips, the sole of the foot and the planks in the deck attached to the back of the house. But if we consider it as something preceding and superior to its abstract property, we recognize it as stemming from the sensual imagination and therefore possessing the qualities of being infinite, indivisible, and single, but not in the way the essence of the universe can be said to be infinite, indivisible, etc. but in the way you can be said to

possess these qualities. Which is through an accident of birth, I suppose, or through the intension and will of those who love you. This number too approaches infinite divisibility and finds its antidote in the sensual intellect.

Infinite quantity can not be measured and can not be composed of parts, infinite and indivisible or otherwise. You are the infinite and indivisible sensual intellect and, consequently, without measure or comparison.

\*

**Schol** We conceive the body as something existing in eternity though there can be no memory of this. This eternity is the eternity of the body outside of memory. It is an essence of mind but only in reference to your body. Your body exists outside of duration and therefore outside time. Memory of your body is the same thing as eternity and as such that which the mind conceives through the sensual imagination and through memory, which has already been stated.

**P24 & Partial Proof evident in Pr 25, 1** the more we understand specific things the more we understand Spinoza's God, who is our God insofar as one is deemed necessary. Eternity, as expressed in the memory and the



actuality of the body – your body – serves an identical function.

\*

The mind affirms or posits only its power, its ability to be something other than not-mind the way we affirm or posit ourselves in the power of our bodies to be something other than not-bodies. Or other people's bodies, which we, for the moment anyway, abhor. **P54** The mind affirms only what is mind and what affirms its power to differentiate itself from other things. It can not affirm what it can not do and what it is not. Similarly, our bodies hesitate to find themselves in other bodies, but they have the ability to do so in a pinch.

\*

The pleasure accorded us through object A is different from that accorded us through object B in that each object has its own nature and therefore its own particular brand of pleasure available. The same holds for pain, vacillation, curiosity, bruising, terror, and loping over meadows. We are passive in the acquisition of each emotion or recreational activity only insofar as we hold an incomplete idea of that emotion or activity. As I am affected differently by each

particular object A and B, I am conditioned in various ways and so my desire must be of differing kinds. But the desire for you encompasses all desire for objects A, B and etc. as well as all loping and other activities and so can be labeled as a single entity. All others must of necessity be subsumed within it the way all objects must of necessity be subsumed within the idea of God.

\*

The desire arising from pain or pleasure is greater as the emotion is greater, a rule having at its center the belief that pleasure and pain are separate entities and not to be confused with one another, even for a moment. That desire may arise from either one in equal measure is not to be taken as evidence of their being identical any more than is your body and the desire that is born of that body to be taken as evidence that what we call desire and what we call body are one and the same entity or dependent upon one another for their tenuous existence.

\*

**Proof P 32 and Cor I** What we call will must be understood as something caused and not free of itself the way pine trees are free to bend in the wind or stand perfectly still depending not, as we might assume, on the force of the air

moving over them, but on nothing whatsoever. Pure whim. A taste for altering things simply to alter them. According to reason, the chain of causation continues forever in reverse until one reaches that place where will no longer carries its current definition; it breaks itself like china against the wall. Hurlled, no doubt, by someone who has had his heart torn into half a dozen bloody and forever thereafter ineffective pieces. It follows that will and intellect obey similar instructions as do motion and rest and are therefore outside even God's jurisdiction. God does not act freely as concerns his own will. When He conjures up oceans, gouges out mountains with his heel, it is because He too has had his heart broken.

\*

Spinoza upbraids the multitude for equating the pursuit of their various lusts with freedom and the observance of piety and religion with a diminishment of this freedom, something they hope to forego the moment they pass from one world into the next like sailors emerging from a perilous fog into the sunshine of the tropics. Where the ports of call boast prostitutes of every persuasion imaginable and music neither too fast nor too slow. Birds in wire cages and chewing gum free of artificial flavors. **Proof and Schol of P41 (to follow)** My lust for you is a kind of piety and religion.

It is that which promises the eternal existence of the mind and the body when all other evidence points in the opposite direction. If we believed our minds and our bodies perished like icicles (or every previous generation of human being), we would, it is true, burden ourselves with traditional forms of piety and wish to be free of them as soon as death beckoned. Why indulge the body when the body is temporary? But your body is eternal, both inside and outside the mind – or the mind’s sphere of influence (which amounts to the same thing) – and so I am all but required to shape my life according to my lust for it. And for you. These things are to be accorded worship just as one must worship and honor the earth and the sky above one’s head even when one can no longer be sure that they are there anymore because one’s eyes are closed.

\*

**P41** Even if we didn’t know the mind was eternal we would begin to suspect it because of the way it places our love and our lusts in the premiere position. It accords them primacy of place before even a sense of place such as might result from your growing up and growing old without ever leaving a ten mile radius, passing the same river and levees, the same grocery stores and cemeteries and Lutheran churches

until they are pressed into the mind like thumbprints in wax.



*Deviled Ham and a Picture of Jesus: Twenty Grubb Tales*  
(Finishing Line Press, 2011)

The Idea of Two

In the dirt, under the floorboards of a shed,  
Grubb finds a mummy. The shed  
is falling in, with ivy creepers on the walls,

inside and out; Grubb can't tell if it belongs  
to anyone in particular  
or has merely been forgotten like a horse.  
The mummy is paper all over  
and it rustles when he picks it up.  
He thinks if he had a pen he'd write a note  
to whoever might find the mummy next –  
*Discovered mummy whilst panning for gold.*  
This is a lie, of course, but a certain misdirection  
is to be expected when commenting  
on the dead. Grubb gets homesick and drinks

from the bottle of rum he finds in a corner.  
He weeps. O! he says, who will make a mummy of me?  
Outside, the coyotes move about like water.  
He can hear them in the leaves; the moon  
pokes its head in through the creepers,  
and then, for a moment, Grubb thinks  
he sees a second universe. Excited, he shakes  
his companion by the shoulders. Soon,  
there is nothing left of it but the seams.

## Aria

The wind throws the leaves against his legs and it sounds, in the trees, like a woman singing. Grubb finds a skiff tied off by the bank and he gets inside. He covers his head with his coat and looks out over the river. The sun comes in and out of the clouds. It shines on the water like a candle. Grubb tries to make out the words of the woman singing, but he knows it is only the wind and the wind has no words unless we put them there, and Grubb is too tired. He knew a woman once who sang to him in bed like this, when he was trying to sleep. In his dreams, she drowned herself, and he warned her every morning, but she wouldn't listen. The skiff pulls at its rope, seems to float downstream, backwards, then turns and bumps into the stump of a tree, something washed down with past floods. The stump is scorched in places, and, wedged in among its roots, a tin can. Unopened. Or what looks like a can from the skiff, but Grubb knows better than to get out in the wind, to try to retrieve this treasure. In his dreams, everything stays the same, but in real life, out here, one thing becomes another. The woman who sang him songs at night lost her voice and when he touched her, her skin felt like sand. In his dreams, though, she showed up the same time every day, her hair



flowing out behind her in the water like weeds. The wind blows the clouds in packs against the sun and the air turns cold. Grubb settles into the bottom of the skiff. Hands behind his head, he waits on the stars, whatever few may make it through the clouds, and he gives words to the woman singing. The words make sense in combination, then change into other things. Birds. Leaves. What sounds like someone tapping at the sides of the skiff. Climb in, says Grubb. Climb in, and cut the rope.

#### Deviled Ham and a Picture of Jesus

At the last second, Grubb jumps into the weeds to avoid getting run over. When he looks up again, the pick-up truck has stopped. A fat man with no shirt on stumbles out and he waves something in his hand as though he has just won the lottery. The man's skin is red and blotchy from the cold or maybe from some ailment that has made him drive this way, Grubb can't be sure. But he knows for certain he'd like to kill the man for nearly running him over. He jumps up and out of the weeds at the side of the road in order to do just that. But he pulls up short because he can see the man's mind is not functioning properly. The man is panting, out of

breath with excitement, and he keeps waving the object around in his hand. He asks Grubb to sell him his shirt because it is cold and he feels as though someone is peeling the skin from his body. Grubb sees that the object is a credit card and he thinks, what am I going to do with that? He remembers the time he went fishing and pulled a coat from the river. The coat had rocks in its pockets, and Grubb was disappointed because he thought he'd caught a fish to keep him fed for three days. But it was only a coat and he wondered who had worn it into the river like that, with rocks in the pocket, and why? Now, the fat man has become obsessed with the appearance of his skin. He drops the credit card and begins to pull at the excess, to pull and shape it between his fingers. He says, I saw this once, in a museum. Grubb snatches up the credit card, and while he's at it, takes the truck. He jumps in, accelerates down the road. Grubb thinks you give things away from bad luck and then they come back again, but they're different. You've got to be able to spot them. Five miles farther on, he stops at a gas station. He buys a tin of deviled ham and a picture of Jesus he doesn't really want. He leaves it on the front seat of the truck and sets off down the lane behind the station, on foot. The sky is dark in that direction. Grubb opens the tin of ham and dips into it with his fingers. The ham tastes

like the sound of ten thousand birds escaped from the bell of a trumpet.

### Fresh Out of Squab

The inmates wander around in the rain. They seem to be looking for something in particular. Their eyeglasses, maybe. A treasure map. Grubb thinks someone must have left the back door open. He stands at the fence and watches them move about in their white and yellow robes. A handful spot Grubb and head in his direction, pausing along the way to whisper among themselves. The hospital stands on top of a hill, its windows barred and only very few of them lit. The oldest man wants to know if Grubb has any liquor, if he has seen the wild goats that frequent this place. The man's beard is white and he picks at his teeth with his finger. Grubb hasn't seen any wild goats, but just on the other side of the river, there is a woman who stands naked in the front window of her house. That's a lie, says one of the inmates who gathers his robe more closely around his neck. He explains why no woman would stand naked in the window of her house, and his argument relies on an elaborate geometry. Just then someone rings a bell on the back porch

of the hospital and everyone shambles off in that direction. Grubb asks the inmate with the white beard what they're having, and he thinks the man says goat, but he's too far away to be sure. Grubb hurries back down the road to the bridge and across the river. The woman is still in the window. A dozen children have gathered in front of the woman's house, and they make room for Grubb only reluctantly. He motions to the woman from outside, says, put on your robe, I have an idea. But she acts now as if Grubb isn't even there, as if he has become invisible. The woman brushes her hair. She sits on the couch and reads a book.

#### Eclogue, with Turtles

The train passes between Grubb and the funeral.  
The spaces between its cars open up and close quickly,  
a noisy succession very much like his days  
have become, faces appearing and then disappearing

simply because he looks at them. The sun stops  
just above a copse of birch trees, curious to see,  
no doubt, what Grubb is going to do. The train is long,  
stretching like mercury back into town and over the river

that cuts it in two. Grubb is no longer welcome there  
for reasons that have something to do with a piano  
and the word "albeit", a misunderstanding, he's sure,

with origins in their schools. He imagines a teacher

with a book on her lap and chalk dust on her fingers,  
a woman full of false information. A turtle, she says,  
supports the world. No one pays attention to her.  
Not a single student bothers to ask the woman what

holds up the tireless reptile. Grubb knows. It is the train,  
or something very like a train, moving and standing still  
all at the same time. He wonders who is being lowered  
over there, who can summon these strangers in black

from their jobs at the dairy and their homes with birds  
in the cages by the windows simply by ceasing to be.  
It is a talent unlike any other, and Grubb despairs of ever  
knowing how it's done. He wants to go over there and talk

and take notes, learn the secrets of the talented man,  
but the train is in the way, and besides, these people  
have undoubtedly heard of his performance at the piano,  
the disputations concerning the proper use of words

and the bloodshed that ensued. The sun grows weary  
of the festivities on the plain and directs its undivided  
attention to Grubb. The sweat walks down his forehead  
like bugs. Is there no end to this living, to this meandering

from one place to another like trains? Grubb finds the river,  
washes his face and kicks off his shoes in the shade.  
He studies the turtles that bask on the half-submerged logs.  
He wonders if they are aware of their obligations.

## Stung

In a field, a blind woman sits beneath an apple tree. Grubb sees her at first from a distance. He thinks she must be meditating because she doesn't move. The woman picks an apple off the ground and takes a bite. There is a sound in the field of insects buzzing, and as Grubb approaches, the sound gets louder. Soon, he sees that the apples on the ground are covered with hornets and he hesitates because he doesn't like getting stung. He thinks hornets are like intelligent people, capable of reading his thoughts. They know when he is confused and they take advantage. But the woman waves him closer. She says, don't worry, they are all so drunk as to be harmless. The woman's hair is dark and she wears a sweater that accentuates her breasts. Grubb wonders if she knows he's looking at her breasts, staring and fantasizing openly. He wouldn't have the courage to be so blatant if she could see, and perhaps this tells her what he's up to. Grubb sits down a few feet away. He realizes, in fact, she's right – the hornets are drunk on the fermenting apples. They stagger here and there across the skins. The pulp of the apples is frequently exposed and turning brown in the sun, and the hornets get lost in there. Some of them seem to have drowned. The woman picks another apple off the ground and brings it to her lips without wiping any of

the hornets away. She says, they can't hurt you. In fact, they make you see. Grubb doubts the truth of this, though, because the woman grimaces each time she takes a bite, each time she swallows. Grubb suspects it is a trap, that the blind woman is smarter than he is and something terrible will happen. All the same, he reaches for an apple and gets stung on the end of his thumb. The woman takes his hand, puts Grubb's thumb in her mouth. He sees a road, then, stretching away in the distance. He sees the sun going down behind some trees.

#### Concerning the Poet and the Barber

The chair is warm as flesh, and there are mirrors here  
but they are cold, each one facing another.  
Infinite revision. When Grubb pictures himself  
he pictures curls and they do what curls do,

cascading mostly. The mirrors,  
as mirrors will, tell a different story. Grubb can't bear  
to look. He closes his eyes and reports  
the scene before him. The cliff and the thorn trees.

The falcon high above the sea. He stands at the summit,  
near the sun, a place where fear has left him like  
the memories of a childhood spent indoors.  
Somewhere the cattle moan as though aware of what's next

and the women fight outside the cabins with their knives.  
The barber is in the habit of tuning all pastoral out.  
He hums a song he learned from a woman  
who didn't love him, who said the heart is made of iron

like a stove. Each clump of near-silver that falls  
to the floor reminds him of the glorious adornment  
of the body, a time when she was vulnerable  
to his hands. But who knows where our power is housed,

if defeat is a matter of appearance or that beneath.  
Sometimes an image in the mirror can scar the glass.  
Grubb finds that his vision has dimmed.  
The flowers fall from high windows and lie in the mud

and the sea foam like shadows without antecedent,  
simulacra before there is an object.  
Grubb falls silent. He caresses a ten dollar bill. The barber  
is somewhere else now, a night when the moon

is dull as a pearl. The woman's fingers find the hair  
at his temples and she pulls as if to pull him free  
of pain itself. And here and there, old men playing  
their oboes,  
the children shouting like mountebanks on the pier.

#### Wan Study

At the edge of the carnival, Where the calliope sounds and  
the lights from the booths and attractions first begin to  
fade, a group of children huddles in a half-circle around



something on the ground. They point and snicker, and one or two of them pick sticks up and poke at whatever it is they've discovered. Grubb, full for once on the half-eaten funnel cakes he finds in the dark places behind the attraction, is curious, but slow to investigate. Hunger, he knows, casts a deadly earnest pale over even the simplest situations. Take away hunger and the whole world is slow again, and pleasant as a dream. When the children part to make room for him, Grubb sees a snake on the ground trying to nose its way between the rocks that bar its escape. The snake is mud-colored with just the slightest trace of pattern on its back and sides, and its eyes are a dull yellow. The children shout and holler and jab at the air around the snake with their sticks, but, even so, they give it a wide berth. They don't know what to do. Some of them look at Grubb as if asking for suggestions. He says, pick it up, go ahead. What are you afraid of? The sound of the calliope and the carnival barkers intensifies for a moment when the wind shifts directions, and the lights of the carnival throw shadows that move and shudder about the children's feet. One boy, larger than the rest and clearly the leader, takes this as a challenge of sorts and leans in over the snake, his hand poised above its head while all the rest of the children fall silent and look on. Suddenly, the snake wheels about

and throws its head out and bites the boy on the wrist. It drops to the earth again and recoils. Stunned, the boy examines his wrist, the two miniature puncture wounds, the tiniest bit of blood and brown venom mingled together on the skin. Eventually, he staggers backward and falls down. He tries to scream, but no real sound comes out of his mouth. The other children shout and cry and some of them run off in the direction of the carnival for assistance. Grubb heads down a trail in the opposite direction, toward the scrub and willows that mark the boundary of a stream. The sound of the calliope and the children shrieking diminishes until there is little left to distinguish it from the sound of the wind moving through the leaves on the trees. Grubb picks his way between fallen logs until he gets to the edge of the stream. He bends down, and, lifting the dark water in his hands, he takes a drink.

### The Way Across

Grubb sits on the railing of a bridge. He spots a girl walking down the road before she spots him. A pair of shoes, tied together by the laces, hangs around her neck. They twist with the movement of her body. There was a time when

Grubb thought he could feel the movement of the Earth, make out the fact of its spinning, and this caused him such vertigo, he couldn't sleep at night lying down. He propped himself up against whatever was handy – a book case, a stall door, stalagmites. In his dreams the world was on its side and everything drifted toward the sky, a parade no longer in thrall to gravity, to the center of the Earth. When finally the girl spots Grubb, she freezes. She stands at the opposite end of the bridge and, for a moment, Grubb thinks she might say his name. She might say it out loud, and the birds will scatter from the trees. But she doesn't say a thing. She slides the shoes from around her neck and places them on the bridge. She backs away and disappears. At some point, Grubb forgot the Earth was moving, and he found he could sleep at night again wherever he was, and there was nothing to trouble his dreams then but the occasional dentist or an oddly-shaped dog that snuck in at the borders. Grubb crosses the bridge and picks up the shoes. He thinks there must be a place where people behave as if they have no more time left, as if the world will go on without them and they'd like to make amends. But he has never been there. He slings the shoes over his shoulder and makes his way back down through the weeds and under the bridge. In the shade, he tries the shoes on, first the one and then the

other. A perfect fit. And all the while, the sun throws its light off the water close by. Its reflection moves in long, half-frenzied lines along the steel above his head.

Clean

At a bend in the river, people get out of their cars and gather on the bank. Many of them wear long, white robes and some others are in complicated hats – with bows on them and even one with what looks like a bird on the brim. A plastic bird painted green. A man precedes the others into the water. He wades in a few feet off the bank and begins reading from a book he holds open in his left hand. Eventually, those dressed in robes pile in as well, and a few of them wait for the man to say something over them, something he reads from the book. Then the others drop these first into the water, their arms folded across their chests. Grubb, watching from the other bank, tries to imagine why they are going into the water like that, but he is distracted by the man with the book, who is waving his other arm, his free arm, about now like he's being attacked by bees. When finally they have left, when they have trudged up out of the river and gotten in their cars and disappeared behind a great deal of dust, Grubb thinks

whatever it was they were looking for is probably still in the river. He kicks off his shoes, sheds his clothes and wades in as far as the middle where the current is strong and the water cold enough to make him fight for breath. When he goes under, there is a dingy green tint and the odd hunk of vegetation floating past. Then, at the bottom, in the semi-darkness, amid the stones where the moss is flowing all in the same direction like hair, he sees the metallic glint of a tin can. It is unopened. Grubb takes the can to the surface and wades out of the river. He puts his clothes on and his shoes, and he walks about a mile until he finds a clearing and makes a fire. He leans against a stump and tries to read the label. The water has blanched most of the ink away but he can just make out an image. Beets. Grubb has little trouble, then, imagining what else belongs there. A brand name and the ingredients in the syrup. Recipes on the back. The things you make with what's inside.

## Light

Grubb find a tree toppled by lightning. Parts of it are scorched and smoking, and a section of the trunk lies off to the side, separated and hollowed out by the violence of light. When Grubb picks it up, it is warm and wet in his hand

and he is reminded of a drum. He tries it out a time or two, smacking the flat part with the palm of his hand, and the sound it makes rings through the woods. Grubb tucks it under his arm and makes his way toward town. He remembers stories of a man who got what he wanted with some sort of musical instrument. A mandolin, maybe. A flute. He sat on a hill and hit the notes until the children all materialized from one part of town or another. They crowded around with gifts in their hands. Diamond rings. Wallpaper. Grubb thinks maybe the world operates on a certain frequency. If you find the right sound, you can slow the world down. You've got it made. At the outskirts of town, Grubb sits down between the highway and the houses that follow it in lines and out of sight. The clouds darken up again and there is the sound of thunder, far away. The first skittish drops of rain. Grubb pounds his makeshift drum until his hand begins to bleed. Eventually, a boy with a nose like a broken pencil shows up. He is carrying a box of corn flakes. After a moment's hesitation, Grubb trades the drum. He takes the box and heads back across the highway again and into the woods, where he stops at a tree trunk and sits down. In the story, the man with the instrument was set upon by the parents of the children he lured away and torn to pieces. But Grubb knows

parents themselves are a kind of story, a story within a story. He has nothing to fear from them. He gobbles up the corn flakes. The rain picks up. It makes a sound in the leaves like people breathing, and suddenly, there is the flash and hiss of lightning come to earth close by. Everything halts momentarily in the illumination – the leaves on the trees, the water hanging in droplets beneath the leaves – and then, almost instantaneously, the thunder. It is a massive thing, a sound caused by the whole world starting up again and continuing on its way. Stunned, made nearly deaf by the proximity of the strike, Grubb looks around until he finds the smoke, the glow of something turned into something it didn't used to be. And he heads in that direction.

#### Variations on Themes by Other People

When the moon is on the pines  
and the wind carries the smell  
of dirt, of lightning, someone  
heaves objects from high windows.

A clarinet and potted flowers.  
A box full of letters and villanelles.  
Ordinary washcloths. Grubb rides  
into town on the back of a truck.

His mind is gone from hunger,  
which is immortal, like oil. He thinks  
he is in the middle of the desert,  
a bad place to be when the sky

decides to unleash its watches,  
its bottles and typewriters. Objects  
whistle and smash into the sides  
of the truck, break open and reveal

the workings of some unseen world,  
a second place. But Grubb has had  
enough of metaphysics and stories  
about monkeys. No end to the noise.

Exhausted, he hops off the truck.  
He makes his way to an inn run by  
two Flemish sisters. Both claim  
to have seen him in a movie, the kind

that starts at the climax and moves  
backward. In the corner, Grubb  
sits at a table with candles and lines  
his hat with wax. The women bring

plates heaped with apples and fish.  
The younger is afraid he will leave.  
Ah, he thinks, Variations on themes  
by other people. The universe. Grief.

Encounter

The bear turns and ambles up the hill. Perhaps it thinks  
Grubb is made of bone and little else. When it stumbles on



a cluster of mushrooms, the stones rain down upon its head. Grubb gathers the abandoned mushrooms in his and hurries for the closest tree before the bear can puzzle out its outrage. The mushrooms taste like sand and air. Soon, the clouds, the sun turn liquid. Human voices are coming from the bear. They sing songs Grubb knew once as a boy. About the earth. About blood and honey.

### Cave Painting

Grubb sees the light from a fire in the mouth of a cave. When he investigates, he finds a woman inside splattering paint on the walls. The woman is hostile at first and wishes him gone. She threatens Grubb with an unopened can of green. She hisses oaths at him, some of which he's never heard before. He suspects they only make sense in another language. Eventually, when she sees that Grubb has no intention of leaving, that he is only interested in the fire, the woman calms down and resumes her work. Grubb sees now her method, the way she works different colors in beside one another, so that the lines between them cross and blend and you can't tell exactly where one begins and the other ends. But he isn't too impressed with this, and he asks her if she has anything to eat. The woman ignores the

question and Grubb rummages through the coat she left by the fire. He finds a package of sunflower seeds and half a chicken leg, fried and a little bit soggy around the bone. Grubb tears into these, half expecting the woman to take exception, but she merely hums fiercely to herself. Grubb thinks maybe she is trying to get inside her own mind so thoroughly, she will never have to eat again. She'll get in there and never come out, and maybe that's what painting does for you – it makes you forget your body. Grubb has no desire for this, though, and, once he has finished his meal, when he himself starts painting, it is only so as to celebrate his good fortune. He dips his hand into a can of red and presses it repeatedly onto the other wall, so that the outline of his hand is there over and over again. Pretty soon he is bored with this too. He paints a dog and a walrus and a nun. The woman stops what she's doing and watches him with her hands hanging straight down beside her, her brush dropping balls of black paint all around her feet. She says, "Well?" and waits for Grubb to explain the connection, maybe make a story of what he's done. But Grubb is getting hungry again. He is tired of art, of having to explain what everything means. He grabs a log from the fire and heads to the back of the cave, looking for whatever he can get his hands on. The glow from the end of the log where it still

smolders throws light and shadow against the rocks there, and, almost immediately, something moves.

### The Unsatisfied

At the edge of town, a man approaches Grubb, removes a pair of thick, winter gloves from his hands. He is tall and one eye looks off in a separate direction. The sun is high over the river and the town and there is the smell of dust and sweat, the sound of people carrying heavy things from one place to another. The man says he knows where Grubb has been and swings the gloves at Grubb's face. Grubb sidesteps the blow, wonders why the man would be wearing such gloves in the first place. It's hot. And there's a great deal yet to do with the hands. Grubb frees the blade from his waistband, catches the man under the ribs, and pulls across his body. The man exhales, then whimpers, sinks to his knees, the red band growing on either side of a clean separation in his shirt. Grubb says I haven't been anywhere. I am not the one you have in your head. He continues up the road, further out of town, and, just in case, finds the first trail off the road and into the woods. He can see people gathered about the dying man now in his mind. They are pointing, discussing the man, his gloves, the

enormous pool of blood in the dirt. The way his wandering eye seems now to focus on everything and nothing at the same time. Some try to picture what has become of their own gloves, if they still wait in the closet for when it's cold. Or if perhaps they have been misplaced along the way – left behind, say, in the vestibule at church.

#### Akin Gideon

On the shore of an ox-bow lake, Grubb sees a man with a goat. The goat is tied about the neck with a piece of rope. The man holds the other end. He seems, at first, to be talking to the goat. But when Grubb gets closer he detects the cadence of prayer, of supplication. The man says he has a plan. He will take the goat into the lake and if it remains dry, he will know he has been heard. He is not alone. And if it doesn't? Grubb wonders aloud, his mouth watering at the sight of the goat, at the memory of that particular type of flesh. Then you may cut my throat, says the man. Grubb wonders how it is we give in so easily. Why there must be things behind the things we see to keep it all from going black. The man leads the goat into the water, where the animal kicks and waves its horns around and tries to get away, its fleece discolored from getting wet. The sign does

not arrive today. Maybe it means something you can't decipher, suggests Grubb from shore, but the man acts as if he doesn't hear Grubb. The man is mumbling away now more furiously than before. He continues his progress toward the center of the ox-bow lake, the goat behind him struggling to keep its head above the surface. Grubb can't abide that outrage. He stumbles in, grabs the animal by the horns, jerks it free of the man's grasp and drags it back to shore. He turns in time to see the top of the man's head sink beneath the surface of the water, the bubbles coming up. Ceasing. The goat nibbles Grubb's shoelaces, then wanders a short distance away to chew on a clump of thistle. Grubb, his mouth watering again, his mind aflame with signs and what they're good for, tells the goat now would be the time to say a prayer to whatever thing a goat might think is up there. And he looks around for a sharp and heavy stone.

#### Four Hundred Rabbits

At dusk, a woman calls to Grub from the porch of a house. She waves him over with one hand and with the other hoists a bottle of something that has made her drunk. She is lean and sinewy, her eyes two different colors, and she leers at Grubb as if he were made of candy. I am surrounded by

rabbits, she says, and she begins a nervous snickering. They're out there, she says. Some of them even have names. The sun drops behind the house and the sky goes red. Grubb sits on the porch beside the woman, takes the bottle when it's proffered. He likes the fire on his throat, remembers a time when nothing could make him drunk. Bottles piled up on the ground and other people fell dead into the river. But Grubb was like a statue made of iron. People came from miles away just to have a look. The woman takes the bottle back, pulls at it. She points. There's one, she says, Oh God! There's one and it's getting closer. But Grubb can make out nothing on the lawn. The woman is shaking now, her free arm clutching Grubb so tightly, it hurts. Grubb takes the bottle back and has a drink. He likes the way his head is immune no longer. It swims out of the questionable past, concentrates on the woman's eyes – one green, one blue. As if she'd been composed of pieces, of scraps left over after a brutal storm. The woman shrieks. I've never seen these particular rabbits, she says, all but climbing into Grubb's lap. What have you done? What have you brought with you from the others shore? Grubb strokes her hair, whispers things that are not rabbits in her ear. Afterward, the woman sleeps and Grubb finishes what's left of the bottle. He searches around inside the house for

another but finds they are all empty. They roll around beneath his feet on the floor. Grubb kicks off his shoes, lies down on the woman's bed and has a dream. Outside, the rabbits gather at the edge of the lawn. They linger there like children, their eyes pure white in the first emergent beams from the moon.

### Not a Single Thing Goes Uncreated

In the brush along a fencerow, Grubb find an egg. It is large and yellow with dark spots covering the shell and there is no nest. Grubb wonders what sort of creature drops its egg without any attempt to conceal it. He picks it up, marvels at the weight of the thing and wonders if perhaps it is not an egg after all, but a work of art. A treasure thrown from a passing car window in an act of jealousy or anger. Maybe it is worth ten thousand dollars. But Grubs knows his luck runs to protein when it runs to anything at all. He cracks the egg, drops the abundant yoke down his throat. It is warm and wet and leaves an aftertaste faintly of tin. For a moment, Grubb feels entirely satisfied, and then his head begins to swim. He staggers down the road for a mile or so, is forced, finally, to shelter in the weeds and shade thrown by a stand of trees. He starts to dream. Grubb is inside the egg, the

shell moving outward. He can see sunlight glinting faintly through the shell, but it is far away and when Grubb opens his mouth to speak, no sound comes out. Soon, he is in total darkness, the world and everything in it somehow yet to be. After a moment spent contemplating the strange beauty of annihilation – of this primal nothing – Grubb grudgingly takes it upon himself to summon everything back into existence. The river, beech trees, meat. The mosquitoes that hound you come dark. Concrete. Stars. He discovers the sound of the mandolin just on the far side of women, shakes them both free with a movement of his head. Not a single thing goes uncreated. When he wakes up, it is dark and the rain has soaked through his clothes. Grubb stands up, heads down the road until he sees the lights of a town situated by the river. He finds a tavern at the edge of town, throws the doors open and says, “You’re welcome!” Those inside stare at Grubb for a moment, then return to whatever it is they were doing. Even the bartender refuses to buy Grubb a drink.

Eclogue, with Skull

The gully is full of garbage, old bed frames.  
Underneath a pile of typewriter ribbon,  
a magazine with a picture of a Pacific atoll



on the cover, Grubb find the long yellow skull  
of a horse. Something worked up from  
an earlier level, and, he thinks, of significance.

Perhaps it was a Pawnee war horse given  
its proper send-off in the vicinity of a mound.  
Perhaps there is no history or itinerary.

His finding it is meant simply as a reward  
for the coming, for the making it through blizzard,  
persistent rain. He is to take it with him.

Hang it in whatever home finally has him  
as its own. Hang it from the wall like a diploma.  
Though Grubb knows there is no wall like

the earth is wont to make between us and others.  
Those who've come before and witness it  
with eyes replaced by clay. Grubb lays the skull

back in among the garbage, the broken bottles.  
He lights a match, watches bone, the paper bags around it  
become something mostly carbon in the flames.



*Slow Codex* (White Knuckle Press, 2019)

### Photographs

Speed blurs the contours and takes us through canyons before we have a chance to orient ourselves, before we have a chance to take photographs with the sun high up and far away in them and the lizards at our ankles.

### The Substance

Traces of the substance attach themselves to walls and cushions and lie dormant for years. Its molecular structure is similar to that of its immediate surroundings. It is contoured much like an asterisk according to the diagrams one finds in books.

### Part of Me

Part of me wants to admit the other parts are entirely too corporeal, like wagon wheels left to bleach in the tall grass as a form of decoration.

### The Garrote

The garrote in the cabinet in the museum looks brand new. It looks as if it has just rolled off the assembly line and someone has dipped it in nickel.

### The Back Teeth

The back teeth emerge last and they are larger than the others and when they get a hole in them they hurt worse. They send us into a delirium where we become convinced we have no teeth at all. They have been removed maybe by someone who used to love us, who used to spend so much time with us at the park and in the cathedrals, we became bored and said things we didn't mean.

### The Ring

I can no longer imagine the ring that changed the shape of my finger, that made it narrow at the knuckle and turned the skin there pale.

### The Lisp

I hoped to listen to her speak for another hour, at least, her faint lisp issuing eddies of color. When she was done, though, she turned on her heels and disappeared so quickly through the doorway, all the light in the room dimmed as if obscured by a hawk.

### The Leaf

The leaf hurries from one place to the next once it has been detached. After rain, the concrete retains traces of the leaf's outline but we know this is an illusion, a promise of longevity made by something we don't trust.

## Pelicans

When I watch pelicans falling from up high or just moving on the surf in twos and threes I believe in reincarnation. I'm sure there's misery, though, we haven't considered, like mites feeding where the quills meet the flesh.

## The Treatment

The treatment involves saying the name of a totem animal repeatedly, even if it isn't yours. Raven, sturgeon, louse. This keeps adherents from becoming overly territorial. It has the added advantage of stimulating the amygdala, which otherwise withers and goes dry.

## The Line

The line refuses to join two points. It is very like a human being in this regard and we feel an antipathy for it almost immediately.

## The Replacement

I thought I'd found a replacement, but it was just the original with a coat of gray paint and deep scratches on either side where someone had tried desperately to hold on.



*The Modigliani is On Loan* (Otoliths, 2023)

A Schema Theory of Everything

Tempting to think the hospital wing named  
for the inventor who first put ink in pens  
and funded by a local family with sixteen siblings  
and nary a tooth in their heads  
will change our lives for the better, or  
at least not cause undo harm when the doors are  
pushed open  
on a cloudy April morning  
and the high school band plays Victor Herbert.

When the episode gets written up by historians  
some decades later,  
terms we don't currently understand or recognize  
will probably be at the forefront,  
terms borrowed from algebra and the sonar-enabled  
surveys  
of the deepest oceanic trenches  
where fish the size of lunchboxes  
lure their unsuspecting prey in  
with phosphorescent appendages attached willy-nilly  
to their heads and to their hindquarters.

The Complaints Come Trickling In

The horse stumbles into its role  
the way we might find a submerged car chassis  
in a bend of the river,  
the way we sit at scuffed-up tables

to play pinochle or blow on a saxophone,  
each its own mythology and syntax.

The horse can locate objects with its nose we can not --  
tubers that come to the surface  
yellow but quickly turn a violet  
so pure as to suggest stretches of the Punjab,  
patches of gasoline spilled  
thirty years ago when we didn't appreciate  
what we had and kept looking  
for something to replace it, something modeled  
in our own heads after  
the mostly symmetrical heads of those who'd come  
before us.

Maybe the horse is some kind of symbol,  
I don't know but  
you certainly can't sneak up on it  
at night  
and impose your will.  
It is a restless sleeper and frequently greets  
the dawn with a jumping and running about,  
a frenzied abandon  
that, according to those who would know,  
serves as a wordless type of prayer.

In Memory of Margo Lane

Trust the cluttered surface, the crusty dishes,  
the unopened envelopes,  
to reveal something underneath  
that others might have intuited previously  
but have somehow kept secret.  
They hide it away in compartments



of their mind's own intricate design  
along with various surnames and mazurkas.

It is an instinct similar to that  
which causes us to hold our breath as soon as we hit  
the water,  
and to exhale again at the memory of it  
long afterward.  
In fact, all of our memories seem to lurk  
porcupine-like and subversive  
in the shadows  
while the radio churns static.

The others head for bed because it was a long day  
and the weather wasn't exactly inspiring.  
I have inscriptions to chisel and  
my head is throbbing, and, the other evening,  
a hot air balloon settled into the fallow field  
not a mile from here.  
There was no one in the basket, not even a  
frightened child.

#### Lectures from the Kentucky Bend

The previously unreleased memos  
bleed into one another like flesh wounds  
and we are left with a sense  
that everyone has already abandoned the vicinity  
with their personalities intact  
but their skin tattered and then re-arranged  
to appear seamless, attractive even.

Say what you want, the seas are whistling tunes

that become less familiar each evening  
and the sailors stick close to home  
as if they know the trek, the journey is just a trope  
meaningful for those who have the luxury  
of reading books all day and then doddering about  
in their gardens.

As for the rest of us, assemble the pieces  
and you have still more pieces lying about  
in haphazard fashion! No one can get to the end of it  
so we start to behave as if there is nothing  
but endings in sight, as if the deathbed  
is just your regular bed  
with lacy pillows on it of the sort that scratch the neck  
and make it nearly impossible to fall asleep,  
and the concertina sitting dusty in the corner  
beckons suddenly to our fat, unsubtle fingers  
like half a sandwich  
to the hovering but otherwise mindless gull.

### The Science Behind Seeing Faces in Everyday Objects

Journey backward a year or two  
and you still won't be able to identify  
the exact moment when everything fell apart.  
It will look now just as it did then,  
a parrot squawking from the neighbor's back porch,  
an airplane flying low overhead.  
Don't put too much pressure on yourself.  
The accompanying voices will fall  
into simple harmonies of their own accord  
and someone will transcribe them eventually,  
someone will find in them patterns

that appeal to both those who have been listening  
to Puccini all their lives and those  
who go ballistic when asked to string a viola.  
The name we give this phenomenon  
is unfortunate, originating as it does in the delta,  
but not the one you are thinking of.  
The Okavango maybe, close to the place  
where you spent almost every summer  
swatting at the oversized hornets and practicing Jiu Jitsu.  
Love affairs were few and far between there  
and you had to content yourself finally  
with flying back home again, hungry and alone  
just as snow began to accumulate  
and the suburban streets grew so slick with it  
you couldn't walk a mile without sliding  
into one of the ubiquitous drainage ditches.

#### Hanlon's Razor

Twenty-seven of the total number  
of tales revolve  
around shape shifting of some sort,  
even if it is only becoming someone  
very like a neighbor,  
with a pipe hanging solemnly  
from an otherwise slack and unremarkable mouth,  
the moon not bothering to so much  
as puff itself up to full capacity  
in honor of the proceedings.

We don't always understand  
the motivations of the less than sentient,  
but rest assured they can be found

with a little snooping,  
with a rummaging through  
the frequently referenced works  
of the Greek illiterate poets  
and the mostly ignored same from Costa Rica.

Spend enough time in those tales  
and you will come to realize  
they are not really tales at all,  
but complex and cunning entities  
designed to sound ordinary  
when listened to from at least ten feet away,  
when overhead by those of us  
who never really wanted  
to be in that position in the first place.

We envisioned a day on the water,  
sailing or pulling up lobster traps,  
especially those that did not belong to us.  
Rumor had it most of those traps  
belonged to a man living alone at the edge of town  
who had this habit of claiming  
he couldn't make ends meet  
while at the same time hoarding  
hundreds of recovered and even stolen  
stained-glass windows,  
many of them depicting the very apostles themselves.

#### Land of Few Pharaohs

The infamy lasted a day or two  
and then morphed  
into something resembling  
sourdough bread,

savory throughout  
but with connotations  
of a formally upscale neighborhood  
and an obstructed view  
of the ocean.

We like to pretend that that part of our lives  
was just a precursor, an interlude,  
a place where we could neglect to tie our shoes  
and still manage to walk down the street  
without falling over.

Our symptoms have grown milder with time  
but they still include respiratory  
anomalies and a creeping malaise  
you could write whole volumes about  
If you could only find the time.

The stockyards  
twenty minutes up the road  
buzz with an inhuman activity  
even in the noonday sun  
and the drifting miasma is something to be feared,  
something to flee  
using any means available –  
bicycles, a child's wagon,  
modified horse trailers  
with functioning refrigerators  
and showers inside.

We are rarely too proud to admit  
when we have made a mistake.  
The repercussions involve  
the loss of employment or  
estrangement from family and acquaintances,

but they are not as daunting  
as the nightmares that otherwise arise.  
Filthy things  
full of bird-eating spiders  
and facial disfigurement  
so horrifying as to serve as models  
for the real-life apocalypse  
or an Italian Giallo.

And yet,  
some of them  
nonetheless manage  
to leave us feeling  
invigorated  
come morning.  
They get the blood  
circulating more aggressively  
than usual  
and fortify our decision  
to stay in Sioux Falls.

#### A Zeitgeist Grown Dormant

The normal order of things looks similar  
to what orangutans get up to  
when you put them in cages and just expect them to  
stay there  
because the meals are regular and the temperature  
never fluctuates by more than a few degrees.

Our disappointment breeds something close to despair  
when we let it sit and fester, when we refuse to discuss  
it with

our first cousins and seek out more distant relatives  
in places like Spokane and that amusement park  
where, according to reports, the lady was strapped  
in safely  
with a harness for a moment but still managed to worm  
her way out.

The soft drinks come with so much ice  
you begin to suspect someone is playing a practical joke  
on you,  
someone is trying to see just how far they can push you  
before you bristle and toss expletives about like  
bocce balls.

Try the coconut cream pie next time you're there,  
you won't regret it, but it probably won't change your  
life either.

It won't bring your hidden or stolen memories

cascading back so that you are able finally to write that  
very long novel  
or, at the very least, amaze your friends with your power  
of recall,  
with your ability to tell them exactly where you were when  
you realized they couldn't be less interested in you, really,  
than if you were some sort of cuttlefish washed up and  
motionless  
on the beach's moon-blemished stones.

The Root Word is "Quench"

Turns out the Holy Spirit  
is more difficult to lure in  
than we first anticipated.  
One mostly reliable approach

involves serpents,  
smallish brown vipers  
draped from our palms  
and larger, emerald and white constrictors  
daydreaming at our feet.

They are rendered  
too timid to bite, forced  
I suppose  
into a state of hibernation  
without the requisite temperature drop.

Afterward, we argue  
for positions we don't believe in  
or understand  
and then act perplexed  
when they are adopted,  
destroying in the process  
any chance of our being recognized  
as geniuses,  
as enfants terribles.

There can be little doubt  
we'll go to ordinary graves,  
plaques and medals  
accumulated before then  
all grown passé  
and even your standard  
ovation gone the way  
of the unicycle or the suit of armor.



Not Merely Possible but, on Occasion, Obscene

We assume the nefarious  
as default – hex-hurling sisters  
and pilots dressed in velvet,

tingly alternatives to  
the mails, say, or lavender soap,  
to rigid engineering

and a disgust with the outdoors  
common among those  
who suffered bronchial issues

when they were young  
and were therefore more likely  
to have finished Moby Dick

before getting a driver's license.  
Say what you want about January,  
it still serves a purpose

even if hampered by  
that distant, all-encompassing  
hum and organic throb

that arises around twilight  
and barely wavers until  
breakfast when it lessens

in intensity and then dissolves  
altogether, to nothing,  
like the galaxy come sunrise,

come advent of light  
and the cackling, the bickering

of children on their way

to school where they  
learn about the Gunpowder Plot  
and the lifecycle of

mushrooms, how  
those who hunt them  
luxuriate in spores.

### Oligocene Dreams

Light toward evening slips through a window of its own  
making  
and returns, a cycle that continues until there is little left.  
You can catch the entirety up in the palm of your hand  
and place it in a jar on the shelf, if you like. You can wait  
until it morphs into something else, a diamond, a distant  
voice  
like the one we hear when we are talking to ourselves.

We have slipped into a habit formed decades before  
when we felt a crab-like vulnerability and no one was  
listening,  
no one was even in the room. The curtains billowed  
occasionally  
and the print on them ran riot, vegetive and alien,

very like what you'd expect on the slopes of a volcanic  
island  
where, it turns out, the jailhouse is the only safe place  
in the event of an eruption. The birds have evolved long,

useless tail feathers and they engage in intricate mating  
dances  
lasting up to five days that have been described  
so frequently by the visiting ornithologists, they don't even  
seem  
that interesting anymore. They have grown ordinary  
as dollar bills or the lint you find in the pockets of your  
coat.

### The Original Visit of Spirit to its Host Medium

Variations resemble their originals  
the way we resemble flightless birds,  
the poorly coordinated limb movements,  
the looking over our shoulders  
as if guilty of a crime that might land us  
in the county jail  
where the inmates are all sleeping soundly  
now that the holiday is over.

I admire the way light refuses  
to travel any farther than it has to,  
the way the sky becomes a permeable barrier,  
but a barrier nonetheless, keeping us  
locked in like ants in those plastic ant farms  
we used to buy at the dime store.

Thankfully, the penchant  
for organizing ourselves  
into ever more complicated hierarchies  
has gone the way of the red wolf,  
with instead our instinct for joy  
showing through finally in the songs  
we sing spontaneously, songs

about wheelbarrows and knife fights,  
songs that resemble in their simplicity  
those Beethoven composed  
when he was interested in the music  
of grocers, of farmers in grottos

rather than the other stuff,  
the enormous, important  
Vienna-soaked concoctions  
designed to make him immortal  
but which strike us now  
as throwbacks to a time when people felt  
as if they were being watched  
at every moment of every day  
by something enormous but  
something they could not see,  
something so far removed  
from current circumstances,  
it might as well have been stumbling about,  
hopeless and alone,  
on Jupiter.

#### Fantastical Settings Enriched with Contemporary Incident

Determine age with radioactive half-lives,  
surveys and old photos of the Dave Clark Five.  
It won't make any difference. We realize  
soon enough numbers of this sort are meaningless as  
a handful of goose feathers stuck to the sidewalk  
on a day with no rain.

Not even the looming threat of nihilism  
will change anyone's mind.  
Most likely we'll have hands raised here and there

to ask after the definition  
as people don't read the Russians much anymore,  
except maybe in Alberta where, well, ...  
what else are you going to do?

We look to the future as if it were some grand Yosemite  
hanging in the air and doing summersaults,  
a kiddie-land paradise  
that just happens to be overrun with bears  
difficult to spot,  
what with the deep shadows, the heat rising in undulating  
waves  
off the mostly full parking lots.

Maybe we have one too many hours  
given to us in a day  
from the generous activity of the sun itself  
and we should just go ahead and behave  
as if we don't know some day the sun is going to wink out,  
is going to extinguish itself because  
to go on forever would be immodest.

#### At Ninety Minutes Over its Allotted Running Time

Panic might seem the most logical reaction  
given the sudden, drain-like movement of the stars,  
the rumors circulating in a mirrored pattern  
here in the towns and townships far below.

Their momentum is starting to fail, though,  
the most innocuous inertia has set in,  
and even the black cat in the window  
across the street no longer bothers to track  
your every movement with its head.

The grocery store is suddenly lousy with cantaloupe.

We could chalk these miracles up  
to others taking us seriously for a change,  
listening to our endless complaints and heartache  
without breaking into so much as a smirk.  
But we would be mistaken.

We would be victims  
of our own strict upbringing and lax study skills,  
of our newfound love for Japanese whiskey  
and checkers instead of backgammon,  
for at least four of the old commandments,

especially that one warning us away  
from expensive things and attractive people.  
Presumably, therein lies the path  
to dissatisfaction, to a constant low-grade humiliation  
caused by asking questions like  
where are you going and what is that heavenly scent?

### Herringbone Sonata

How to turn our backs on this land where reptiles  
are familiar and rough-hewn, like wicker patio furniture?  
They are always opening and closing their mouths.

Accents and idioms aside, all available information  
suggests there is nothing overly alien  
about the other side of the world, the desert wastes  
and the arboreal forests without visible end.

We could make a go of it there if we were prepared  
to acknowledge our soft natures, our inability to recognize

even simple geometric patterns and the outline of fences.

Maybe the antidote lies at the bottom of a well  
dug who knows how many decades ago at precisely the  
spot  
children were most likely to fall in, at the top of the ridge  
overlooking the valley and the homes in the valley  
with their chimneys losing gray smoke and the crescendo  
of birdsong  
reminding us of the days long gone when we too studied  
music seriously, memorizing chord progressions and Celtic  
scales,

endeavoring to pull enormous, complex, suggestive works  
from the moist interior of our skulls, only to find  
when, finally, we managed to lay them out forever on the  
page,  
they seemed like little more than empty oyster shells  
stacked on a table with yellow newspaper and warm  
bottles of beer.

### Mingo Junction Fugue

Here where the enormous eels  
talk to themselves in their sleep,  
we are wholly invisible,  
judged by the rest of the world  
to be neither sentient nor quantifiable,  
a people like mushrooms  
hiding out in patches, tending to disintegrate  
at the slightest touch.

I, for one, am ready to move on, to follow

the corner of the sky still visible  
with its vapor trails in the morning, while comets  
with names we will never know  
announce the advent of evening  
the way your niece announces she is pregnant.

We imagine out there a city  
with a gleaming tower at its center,  
pedestrians confused by traffic signals,  
by the endless passing of ambulances.  
They walk in circles  
and mumble to themselves for hours  
until, like the great unplanned flowering of the universe  
itself,  
their original destinations  
mysteriously come into view.

Happy and relieved by this miracle,  
they forget for a moment the insults  
done to them that morning,  
the unkind words or the splashing  
of the puddled water at the side of the road  
onto their coats by passing cars.

### Apparatus

Much of the initial pain  
is replaced by something approximating joy  
but without the primary colors  
and the ocean-going birds circling overhead,  
emitting shrill sounds of the sort  
that might startle even the deepest sleeper.

The point is to rake and damage the flesh



before it hardens and traps us the way  
prehistoric insects kept getting themselves overrun  
by outflows of tree sap.

Maybe, like theirs, our reaction times  
have suffered a bit,  
have come to resemble those old, slow-motion film clips  
of horses at full gallop.

That which isn't speeding up, isn't  
accelerating due to the implacable forces of desire,  
must (if not quite by definition)  
slow down, or at least  
search out alternative forms of gravity, must conjure them  
with such intense concentration  
you couldn't break it even with a hammer.

#### Souvenirs from the Fortunate Realms

The permanent residents  
thought us tacky.  
They displayed banners  
to that effect, in secret code.  
We broke it  
after days of difficult labor  
but what was the point?  
The afternoons still drifted by  
carrying their scent of elderberry.

You couldn't tell if the violence  
rumored to be approaching  
had anything to do  
with the speeches delivered at the pavilion

on the Lake of Three Fires.  
The name itself  
suggested a conspiracy of some sort,  
a banding together for security  
or tactical advantage  
such as one sees in the wildlife  
on the savannahs,  
the springbok and mandrills  
traveling together in groups.

My history books are torn  
and weathered  
at just those sections that might explain  
where we find ourselves,  
but when was the last time  
we paid much attention  
to history books, even when pristine?

I prefer to imagine a past  
so similar to the present  
the only way  
you can tell where the one  
gives off and the other begins  
is to feel for the creases,  
to capture the telltale tactile change  
with the tips of your fingers,  
themselves made sufficiently sensitive  
by a lifetime of practice,  
of caressing the flesh  
of a few accommodating strangers,  
or, at the very least,  
gutting chicken carcasses  
and peeling fruit in a well-appointed  
kitchen.

The Modigliani is on Loan

Which villain warrants more attention, the man at the gate with faux orchids in hand and an accent we can't place? Or the demiurge come fully formed from the pages of *Timaeus* and the silty floor of the sea disturbed lately by the drifting of the continents and the debris from shrimp boats damaged and then unceremoniously scuttled?

I suspect the answer is lying about in pieces with jagged edges and a guidebook that will be translated when someone competent can be located in the halls of the local college. Or, more likely, the aisles of the feed store where the floor has been scuffed by generations of boots made from exotic animal skins. Where the prostitutes aren't as easy to spot as they are, say, in Boise. But they are available just the same, so long as you know how to ask.

Leave off any trace of nerves or that treacly condescension that works so well in the pews and on the sidelines of the soccer fields, and replace it, however briefly, with the gibberish one expects in institutions for the profoundly insane. A sound rising each morning to a crescendo and then falling each evening into a low and intimate murmur,

a purring like an ocelot kitten's. When the staff puts on its production of *Measure for Measure*. When the medications kick in and the little brown bats circle the gingko tree in the courtyard outside in what can only be described as an unprovable moonlight.

\*

The territorial charter mentions neither fences nor names of rivers nor why there should be a territory here at all as opposed to simply a grouping of homes constructed of brick and boasting indoor plumbing as well as outside breezes fragrant with persimmon.

Few read the charter but if you do, notice the lines pre-authorizing the creation of an art institute, as if someone knew before a single road had been paved or foundation laid that the territory should exist for purposes more important — dare we say it? sublime — than any that preceded it.

I stand at the far end of the portico and turn my nose up at pretty much anyone who walks in, whether I recognize them or not. It is just the sort of thing that gets one a

reputation and mine develops so quickly some have accused me of creating it ahead of time. Of lifting salient details from the characters in the better-known medieval mystery plays.

We all have our crosses to — if not bear — then erect around the premises as if they were mere decoration. When someone points out the pathology at the heart of this endeavor, we can't help but become a little obsessed with how unfairly we have been treated. We can't help but pout like children informed they will receive no cake until they cease threatening to physically injure their siblings.

I often feel as though I am not really a single thing moving through time intact, but a series of merely exterior sensations following one upon another without interruption but with little to tie them together either, thematically or aesthetically. Like bacteria that divide and continue to divide until something noxious comes along and shuts the whole process down.

Practically speaking, our membranes have gone missing, each pre-existing demarcation having somehow merged with its neighbor until the whole edifice appears blurry,

something out of a poorly executed daguerreotype. Or the brain of a child suffering a pronounced fever.

I suspect the culprit is history itself, a four-letter word in these parts apt to conjure grown men walking about in iron clothing.

Maybe the real problem is best illustrated by the anchors and the anvils that keep popping up in unexpected corners of the subterranean hallways and janitors' closets. Their locations suggest they were never really intended to be part of the collections proper, but were instead dropped off randomly here and there by visitors who just happened to come into possession of implements that otherwise serve a completely ordinary purpose.

The lengths we go to are hardly surprising, but they are lengths just the same and ought to make us consider, even just briefly, why we should go to them in the first place. We could go to the flea market just as easily and be better satisfied with the outcome.

None of which is meant to suggest existing alternatives have more to offer than the anchors and the anvils. Just

take a closer look when you stumble upon one in the future and admire the workmanship! The throbbing sensation it creates when you thump it with your fist!

\*

Sometimes we have to admit that familiarity is a too-rapid thing. It approaches with the velocity of a locomotive, but without all the noise, and when you find yourself in its grasp, you only really have three options. Two of them are not very promising and the third is very like the other two in its tendency to remind you of nights spent tossing and turning as the result of general despair. Or a very particular lobster dish.

The simplest route to the institute takes us through an alley that has been given a poor reputation by those who congregate there in the glow of the streetlight, though you can tell these people are mostly harmless by the outdated tunes they whistle and the pomade in their hair.

Luckily, I do not have to leave the premises. I live on the second floor and keep an ear peeled for the arrival of out-of-town relatives who have the habit of ringing the bell at

the front entrance long after close in the evening. It helps that I can't see the entrance from the balcony of my room, but I can hear most anything that occurs on the grounds when the sliding door is open and the nearby freeway traffic has let up a bit after rush hour.

Sometimes the conversations are so intense I have trouble ignoring them and I am tempted to wander downstairs and unlock the front entrance and let everyone in. But I am usually able to avoid this temptation by shooting bottle rockets off the balcony instead and watching them explode at such height and in such varied colors as would charm even the simplest idiot.

Funny how the systema nervosum isn't really a system at all but a web of random and accidental connections originating in a primordial swamp and illuminated by lightning.

When you treat it that way, when you admit that you have no more control over it or understanding of what it consists of than you do the vagaries of Welsh syntax, it rewards you with constant gifts of immunity. Of days spent with little or no care for the vicissitudes that might bring others to their knees. The talk of divorce and the tax codes and the



tendency of the heavens to unleash themselves in murderous torrents.

You can always knock at the doors of the few supposedly unused rooms and listen for the reactions inside. The terrified screaming, I suppose. The whispers of coming calamity and renewal like that which was visited upon the heroes from the clay tablets, from a time when deities walked the Earth, or at least floated above it, just out of reach.

I hear all the same rumors even now, filtering up from unknown reservoirs and spreading out in what can best be described as simple capillary action. I pour cups of palm wine and attempt to share them with the shadowy collaborators I imagine lurking in the corners. I ask them with each additional swallow whether the universe is, in fact, expanding. Or if this is just an optical illusion caused by our central placement within it.

By morning, I am completely incapable of recall. It feels as if I have been conjured in a glass tube from an admixture of elemental particles and old spells handed down from one generation to the next so that, invariably, mistakes occur.

Mutations infect the process with accretion, and the final outcome can no more be predicted than rationalized after the fact.

Close inspection of the tablets hung on the wall by the south windows overlooking the river and sharing space with the Russian futurists reveals an odd admixture of technical terms and metaphysical speculation completely inconsistent with itself, as if four or more pagan cosmologists had been applying their talents at once without bothering to communicate, without bothering to so much as learn the proper way to hold their utensils!

This, says the director, a woman with a Latin American accent and eyes split green and brown down the middle, will lead to little short of ruin. A reputation for wanting to have our cake and auction it off too.

Disagreements like ours seem sometimes to arise from the ether itself, the fifth element of the quintessence (or is it the sixth?). The only way to avoid the resultant catastrophe is to act as if it had been your idea all along. Something you had been actively working toward with the single-minded devotion of an airline pilot suddenly facing the prospect of

coming back to earth again without the assistance of his electronic instrumentation. Or a shepherd so thoroughly sick of smelling like his flock, he lets it drift further and further out of sight, just as the stars are beginning to show and the leopardess stirs, stretches, and yawns wide to expose her wet and fleshy maw.



## Part Two: Longer Works



*Eros & (Fill in the Blank)* (Blazevox Books, 2009)

When events transpire the way they do – which is to say like locomotives appearing where there are no tracks – we are disappointed. But not altogether without recourse. Before you know it, stakes have gone up around the periphery of town. And the sweet smell of wood smoke fills one's nostrils. I suppose it is cherry. I don't know. There are, of course, different versions of a single event depending on how many people you question afterwards. And in what manner. Survey. Gossip. This is a commonplace that has no business in these pages. But it appears anyway because the alternative is so bleak, we can't face it. It hovers just beyond the edge of our vision like a fruit bat having a go at a clutch of mangos. The listing to one side you feel in the morning then is not going to get any better no matter how hard you try to live your life right. It is a symptom of something much deeper than morality, something beyond just salts and minerals. It is a holdover from that time when human beings were not so thrifty as they are today. They were willing to spend whatever they had amassed among the reed beds. If this meant starting over on occasion, it was worth it. If for no other reason than the feeling they got from eliminating their pots and their bowls and their

blankets was very similar to that we get now from wagering three months' rent on black. Or bedding someone we know is not the least little bit discreet. We are lighter for it. No longer weighed down by that which keeps us forever in the photographs. Even those no one really looks at anymore. And it's funny, the way we stand there, waiting, tugging our lips up at the corners. It's as if we are engaged in the most important activity in the world and we know it. The settling of the image once and for all. The halting of the face just long enough to prove that it was an actual thing. Something someone looked forward to addressing come dinnertime. Even reaching out and stroking on occasion. The way you might attempt to calm a parrot in its cage after it has heard a loud noise. She assumes the visions that appear in the early morning are somehow more fundamental than those that come in the mid-afternoon. When the sound of the breeze in the magnolia tree is something to record in your journal. If you're sure no one will read it. If it is safe from prying eyes, like those animals that spend their whole lives in caves. Crustaceans, mostly. Such things as make life itself doubt its own direction. Ask in the form of seizures and red tides questions one really ought to leave to the clergy. Or those bullies who are never content to take your lunch money, but must also bring on darkness. That metaphysical



dread Eulalie had always before assumed belonged to others. Like cuff links. Or a fancy pair of shoes. Parts of the accomplished world that she, with her broken zipper and page-boy cut, would never be able to enter. Where the logo on the side of the truck breaks the plane of consciousness, but the lumber in the back does not. Because it is not representational. Odd, she thinks, how we remark and remember the artificial with much greater clarity than we do those things we had no hand in creating. This is, in fact, one of the oddities of the human organism, and may even function as a perfectly workable definition. We are that which prefers the made-up. Whereas everything else is simply bored by a picture, if it even notices it at all. Put, for instance, the *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* in front of a housecat, and it will demand its supper. Not from the painting but the person carrying it. But ask yourself: which would you rather spend time with? The artwork or the model? Well, probably neither if you are anything like the people Eulalie finds herself surrounded by every moment of every day. People so utterly unresponsive to both the things of this world and the things of the mind, she begins to wonder just where it is they reside. Perhaps you've been approached already by those who make a fortune selling flesh to people who believe they can't get along without it. Which is pretty much

all of us. But who is there to witness this, if not your nemesis? Or the coaches, of course, of the volleyball team? They are caught out where they don't belong. And have to make their excuses like ordinary spies. They fail to arrange for the limousine. Or to pull the carrots from their accusers' gardens. Some other, weaker-willed individuals might try the same if they find themselves in difficult circumstances. But, of course, the value of withholding vengeance is not something obvious. Especially to those who hurt themselves in the process. Who pull tendons. Or wind up in divorce court when they didn't even know they were married. Which means all our backward-facing encomiums must turn around eventually and acknowledge the horizon. They must find their way in the world, like prospectors. Otherwise, we are trapped forever in a dilemma of our own making. One that nevertheless seems like the work of unseen forces -- because we can't imagine ourselves cooking up something so elaborate and untoward without a certain amount of training first. Or, at the very least, the use of a chalkboard. One where the directions have all been spelled out ahead of time. In an unusually elegant hand. Your provisions include a screwdriver. Several tins of soda crackers. Whatever metal is in favor at the moment. For trade or simply decoration. Which is how one proves one is

civilized. How one suggests the need for better table manners. You notice almost immediately a glow to the horizon not caused by any heavenly body. But more likely the activity of the electricians who call that part of the world home. When they are wont to call anything by its proper name, rather than what we might term its biological designation. Its insect moniker. Butterfly clamp. A Boll Weevil moon. Innocent metamorphosis of this sort frequently informs the songs your neighbors sing. When they are milking cows and folding laundry. The songs, in other words, that keep their minds occupied while their hands scuttle about like crabs. Or indicate what is desired. How we should address our elders once we have drunk too much saki. And the paranoia sets in like an avenging angel. Or, for that matter, like twilight. Which always seems to arrive just in time. You imagine what you want is the sound of nothing happening. The intermittent buzz and far-off movement of water in the pipes. The occasional dog barking a street over, the sound of it muffled in the windows, in the curtains. The dream is to have isolation and deem it something more than isolation. Something benevolent as flowers, assuming you are not allergic. There are those who will stop at the window when they see belly-dancers practicing. That coterie of otherwise solitary

housewives learning to move in ways that trouble strangers. What we find outside the self varies, then, in terms of value. In terms of how much we'll spend to acquire it, or keep it at bay. We realize there are no anchors. Nothing to keep fossilized crinoid stems from showing up where they don't belong. And if this isn't sufficient to make us wish the moon had towns visible from our own, or the ferns would make themselves scarce like the fedoras we wore once in their millions, then we have no one to blame but ourselves. We know the cans in the cupboard haven't moved exactly so much as they have been replaced by other cans. Those which don't contain what's on their labels. Or at least not much of what's found there. The sunlight, the linen, the cathedral at the center of town. They trick us so completely, you might almost think we wish to get tricked. That we court illusion the way some people court prisoners or rich widows. One can't help but wonder if there is anything at stake. If the continent has shifted beneath our feet or the programs featuring French horns may not, in fact, be just so much exercise of a nervous mind. One that imagines itself on a stalk. On a ladder, overlooking the rest of the world. In broad daylight maybe, but mostly at night. When the avenues have dressed themselves up in neon like deep sea animals announcing their outlines in a void. One

they had no say in making. Nijinsky, when asked how he stayed in the air so long, said there is no reason to come down immediately. Stay up there a while, why not? Madness often allows us a glimpse of the machinery that moves it from the interior to the borders. Where people are waiting around fires. Harmonicas in their pockets. Gallons of cheap red wine. No matter how you phrase it, how you try to make of what terrifies you something that appears, at best, every couple of Wednesdays, there will always be that sense that you are surrounded. By living rooms that don't belong to you. By dogs that have learned to call out at the moon. Not from instinct, but the same arch sophistication that contaminates their masters. And the crust of the Earth. Because ours is an advanced planet. The kind of place you read about in magazines but never in books. Just as though a man of genius might be expected to dream up Orion's Belt. But Destin, Florida! Leave that to the professionals. True opportunities have a way of camouflaging themselves, though. Turning walls into permanent miracles and sending us stumbling about in the cold like those half-things, ghosts, who have no forward momentum. You'll say such things are rare, but even Paraclesus, castrated in his youth by a hog, knew gold is not a byproduct of alchemy. Nor is it, really, the goal. His name should grace our every bottle of aspirin.

Treasures come in different sizes. According to when they were buried. Tuesdays, for instance, are set aside for trinkets. For diamond earrings and the stamps first printed in Mozambique. From there, you may expect dozens of interested parties. The Dutch throw windbreakers over their shoulders. The barely experienced try to hide their shortcomings by drawing pictures. Of the castles they've seen and where the water is. We might, we believe, be forgiven, if no one else speaks the language. But to rely on the kindness of nature is simply pushing the matter to the very edge of credulity. The mosquitoes, for instance, pull themselves up on the surface of the water like Olympians. They make one long for chemical agents. But that just means there are other worlds beneath this one. Where the residents wish for transcendence so persistently they show up in the garden. On the bus. At the very edge of Navajo settlements. Bringing with them a half-formed knowledge of what has happened before. Something they could sell to strangers if those strangers understood the danger they were in. The cake-like fragility of the earth. Of course, it doesn't take long to figure out believing in a place, any place, is apt to get you sent in the opposite direction. We learn this the moment we are born. And we go on learning it like tadpoles let loose in a bucket. Bumping into the sides

and turning on themselves so that, eventually, there is a place in the middle where they congregate. They think there is no danger there because there is no extension. We are optimists of a sort. Even when our ribs are showing. Paradox thrives in verse as well, so that you need only be familiar with Tennyson to suspect there is no way out. In reality, we are trapped the way animals are said to be trapped when they choose to bite instead of turning to stone. The best route to a repertoire, then, is through the delta of some river far from where you were born. The people there should speak a language so unlike anything in your past, you begin to wonder if it isn't simply invented at every moment for the purpose of buying leather goods. Of turning the darkness of the closet into a myth instructive for children. Because they spend so little time there. But the perpendicular face of even the simplest wall and the temerity of strangers convince us what we've stumbled on is not the beginning of our time alone, but the very center of it. Where we will remain in spite of our own best efforts until the chorus begins and the snows turn the valley a condescending gray. Still, how does one alter the view in the window without first falling asleep? Or breaking out the oils someone left in the attic when there was no more time for art? When the townspeople crowded around on the

sidewalk with torches? Imagine if peacocks had arrived then in cages made of whale bone. Would we still find them exquisite? We abandon the image of ourselves we have created just when the fiction is about to pay off. The whole world, it seems, outside the door and waiting for a statement. About fly fishing. About the state of one's soul when everyone else has dropped theirs on the pavement. And if you were to see them, searching, you might suspect the sun was so close overhead, it wasn't the sun anymore but the very thing that had made them crazy. This is why Boccaccio puts the tale of Mithridanes and Nathan toward the end. So as to hide whatever brilliance might otherwise make us blind. He knows you have to work your way up. Follow those who've come before. Of course, the air there is nothing like the air we breathe down here. In the morning. When many of the most beautiful women in the world are wide awake. They wrap themselves in coats and head out into the cold. Searching, despite what their neighbors might say, for nothing more scandalous than rope. Once again, they have filed the tusks off the walrus. Afraid, apparently, it will set the record straight. And the children are all visiting from the cancer ward. They have dropped their cameras because there is nothing to take a picture of. No ripened fruit. No John of the Wilds. No soot



on the Hartford Building where Wallace Stevens spent his lunch hour dreaming the end of the sea. No treasure in the top drawer among your father's pornography. The watchbands. The coins the coyote buried once in desert sands for reasons we can't imagine. No "Juniper Tree" because we find it altogether too graphic. No rigatoni. No people who've come to desire everything. Who gather behind the Dairy Queen when the cyclone sheds its coat and stumbles past as if it had planned all along to tempt them. No long-lost brother. And yet, what can we know of other people? That they convince themselves love is something good for you, like cucumbers? That the wind doesn't make the sound they remember? It's not the history of the nine that concerns us, but the history of the number nine. The way it makes its appearance just when we thought it had become unnecessary. Whichever faction takes its name from the numeral is less important, ultimately, than is the school's mascot. Still, we ought to pay attention to the demonstrations in the street. The tambourines overseas. Otherwise we are just bumpkins. With no real sense of why things happen the way they do. Or who made them happen that way in the first place. This is what Eulalie told herself, at any rate, when she was riding her bicycle past the laundry and thought she saw inside a

poster of a man. One who'd arrived there from her mind, the way coconuts wash up on the beach or the contents of a letter reveal nothing is as it seems. Unless it's the letter itself. Which is so solid even a magician would be hard pressed to turn it into something that does not resemble paper. Like rubies, for instance. Or those tortoises people used to decorate with rubies. And other precious gems. Because they were bored. Because they had been reading the poems of Proust's friend Montesquieu, when they should have been reading almost anything else. The scrub pines are artificial, trucked in from the back lot and forgotten, overlooked like those waterholes where porcupines show up to gnaw the bones of any creature who succumbs. To the water itself, which is full of microbial hazards, but which retains nevertheless its sweetness, like a child. All is lost ahead of time. Every strategy. Every plan and bouquet. Every seedpod let loose on the wind. Or snagged at the edge of the carpet, which amounts to the same thing. If we are going to determine the future with questionable methods, like standing in the rain at the gas station and waiting for the lightning to coalesce above our heads, or reading the entrails of a chicken, then what's to keep someone from leaping through the parlor window? At the very moment when we are gathered there to remember

an aunt who used to claim nothing extraordinary happens. There is nothing to differentiate this place from any other, with the possible exception of the spiders, which all walk around with question marks on their heads. The invitations don't mean what we think they mean. Especially if they come out of nowhere like pigeons we thought were extinct. But which have merely been idle on the island of Sri Lanka. Of course, the names change every time someone new comes to power. And someone else gives up his power reluctantly. Just as if we'd rather drop the salad fork, rather pry our lips from the lips of the woman we love, than acknowledge we have no control. No say-so in matters of destiny. The affairs of the liver. Houses spring up all along the highway. The sand flies make life so miserable you'd think the mangroves would be left to stretch undisturbed for a thousand miles in either direction. But there are people who will spend the day flapping their arms at the edge of a crater. Or badgering the occasional sloth bear with a camera. All in the belief that nothing bad will happen. That they can just continue on their way from one everyday miracle to the next. Like Satyrs. Wagering in that direction, though, will only get you tossed out of the Rotary Club. Just when the wind had all but forgotten to make you miserable. For the wind carries ideas around inside it like a brain. We

go to one mountain after another chasing them. The poorly-named back alleys, though, have just as much to offer. Just as much vinegar made without oversight. Because it is expected there. By people who have all read Madame Bovary in school. They think Emma the creation of a man who spent too much time whittling hickory. It's the same with the cafeterias, swimming in microbes. We haven't the heart to eliminate them. Because what if there's something hanging over our heads as well? What if the earthquakes are only half the story? And that crippling jealousy, say, another one-eighth? You wish to go into the world to find it. But you haven't the strength. Because what if what you find doesn't correspond to what it was you were looking for? Doesn't seem like anything you'd want to call your own? We are expecting some sort of pay off whether we want to admit this or not. And whatever disappointment exists one or two paces ahead is not, we say, designed for us. Set out and arranged ahead of time by uncannily steady hands. But accidental. The kind of thing that makes for pleasant reading on a Sunday morning. When the fish are wide awake in their containers. And you experience that odd, unpleasant sensation that there was something you were supposed to do. Some important errand or missionary task you were supposed to perform but forgot about at the

last minute. And you think maybe you should put the magazine down. And the scissors, and the cat. Respiratory ailments are not unique to genius. You find them in the teachers' lounge. On the basketball court. In the judges' chambers. And catalogue them by symptom if you know the symptoms. If you have been trained in those techniques that recognize, despite the diversity of the organism – those subtle differences that make one prefer seafood and cause the other to have yellow eyes or a propensity for addictive behaviors – that we are all ultimately identical. A more or less upright bundle of protoplasm looking, it seems, at every moment to untie its bonds and drop to the earth again in the smallest packages possible. Or the least complex, Eulalie thought as she wandered about the cave in solid darkness. Having forgotten to bring a fresh set of batteries and remembering only at the last minute there was a drop off named after the first man who disappeared there. Who had dreams of an entrepreneurial bonanza underground. And paid for those dreams with his life, apparently. But not before setting up a snack shop at the entrance. One that carried confections. And okra. Trucked in from nearby counties, fried up in a batter of his wife's invention. It was said she waited half a day before sending the dogs in. And when they too failed to return, she cashed

in the annuities and took a cruise. You follow your routines each morning, wishing, all the while, you could build a raft of hollow drums and the trees that have fallen since last winter. You could float across the swamp that separates your back yard from that part of the world where people don't remember the Civil War. Because it happened in books they haven't read. Or, when they read them, they were still reeling from a night spent catching up with friends over a bottle of tequila. In any case, you can't expect them to greet you with open arms when you show up with Spanish moss in your hair and a song with no melody on your lips. One you picked up from a man skinning an animal in front of his house. Supposedly to eat it, of course, but in reality, to frighten off the spirits who are in the habit of showing up at night and mumbling incoherently. God knows what it is they are after. Habit must be so powerful we can't shake it even when we're dead, a prospect so terrifying it causes us in the here and now to pursue hazardous activities. Like exploring glaciers, tiptoeing over crevasses thirty feet deep, when we'd rather be safely home in bed. Whatever boundaries we cross then must exist solely in the mind. Because if they didn't, if the line was as real as the barbed-wire fencing that separates the slaughterhouse from the interstate, there would be nothing to prevent the

fishermen from committing suicide at the first sign of inclement weather. Or the drag queens from shipping off to other states where they perform not for the fun of it, nor even for the money, but because there are no other options. They are trapped in a recurring present of the sort Parmenides warned us about when he thought he was simply being clever. And to fight this process, to moreover insist it doesn't exist, is like writing obscene notes to a woman you met in ceramics class just because she happens to look like someone else you used to know. Someone who enjoyed such attention no more than this one does. Who threw the notes back in your face, in fact, and even threatened you once with a razor. Odd how we trouble ourselves with sound. The grating of one thing against another like armies. Galaxies in miniature. Primeval balloons. And yet, who hasn't turned to the wall expecting a tale to materialize? One so bloody the protagonist tries to distance himself from the action. He winds up in a garage, amid tarps and brush killer. Thinking perhaps he has returned to those who dream about him at night. And wake up afraid the sun will punish them. Will throw them down like playing cards. I too pull tricks of this sort, convinced finally I haven't much longer to live. And knowing all the while the street is just a street and not worthy of notice.

Unless there are panthers in it. Skulking about the garbage cans. What we wouldn't give to see something where there had always been something. And yet we hadn't noticed it because it was there! Wood screws in the spider webs. Dew in the eye of a statue. They make you restless. As if you'd been to the bazaar and come home without a basket. Without a scar on your back. Such stationary beauty gives rise to myths of the mobile. A re-examination of Icarus, making his way to the pole. And turning left. We imagine dramas played out for the benefit of the Inuit. Until there is nothing left to play. Or at least very little that doesn't somehow involve people throwing themselves into impossible situations. And then expecting to get out of them again as effortlessly as a downpour conjures weeds from a handful of soil. I suppose this offers hope to the immortal. But the rest of us had better stick to oatmeal. To the sound of the trombone coming from the radio, when people stand around at night, hoping for a planet to race into ken. For an allusion to pop up from the river like a muskrat. And yet, all they really need is obscured by all they desire. By the heavy tread of that particular ogre, making the whole world muddy. In the tincture of the moon. Perhaps we weren't meant to understand that thing that sits inside us. Not so much organ. Or metaphor or scar. Just



a presence that would prefer we look elsewhere to figure out what it is. The way you have to watch the movement of the ants to know what the topography is like underneath. This is how geologists find oil when they'd rather be sleeping. Or at least writing letters to lovers who won't speak to them anymore. Who won't acknowledge the bliss they knew until recently has not been ruined. By time and distance. By the unkind things that were said at the gate. It's the reluctance on the part of all but the most adjusted, the most greedy and determined, to admit we aren't that important -- that the comets might not know where to find us should they need to fall out of the heavens on a dare -- that populates our nightmares with electricians. Who turn into wolves. And then back into electricians again, before they can do any substantial damage. Still, there are remedies you can administer in the morning when your eyes are still foggy. Still suffering the effects of your visit to worlds just like this one. With the bird cages in the corner. And the birds in them pleased, for once, to be something more than just decoration. Something that matters. Because their absence would cause a mountain of exegesis. By those who study what we are. And what we tell ourselves we are when we are not serious. One might apply Darwin in this context, but the results will be disappointing.

A rendering of *Pride and Prejudice* that spends all its time examining the contents of the cupboard. It's the process of composing books in the first place that opens up before such an approach. And even here, Darwin is much too tame. One ought rather enlist Lamarck, the passing of learned behaviors from one genius to another. How Rabelais, say, acquired his Erasmus more thoroughly even than his thumbs from the ape. The depiction of bliss depends for its authenticity on eight specific elements, but only one of them is available at any given moment. You'll notice, for instance, the bread never appears on the table by itself, but must be accompanied by items of secondary importance. Such as fish or decanters or that wax that hardens to look like dangerous animals. The hides, at any rate. The angles. We come to recognize outlines in the middle we had hoped to run across in real life, but disappointment often shows up like this in costume. In fact, it seems as if we end up half the time in an altogether improper cosmos, one no more pleasant to spend time with than a gull. And we try everything we can think of to find the exit, to swing the saloon doors open. But that just gives us more doors and a constant ringing in the ears like you might get working in a factory where they make the long part of cranes. And the short part of nearly everything else. Refrigerators. Titanium

death masks for those customers who like to get the details out of the way. Which begs the question: How does one keep track of the image that is not an image, that which presents itself through the medium of the intellect spontaneously, like a ceiling grid? Like an aerial snapshot of Agincourt? We can insist the outward structure comes fully formed, tossed off from the brow of Zeus before the innards have caught up. But we are only fooling ourselves if we think this will make the marsh any sweeter, will make the mouth say the right things. There's a certain beauty, for instance, to the nose so far removed from that of the rest of the face and the lips, we begin to think it originates somewhere else. It rises from the depths of the race and hangs on at the edges, poorly understood, a distant relative to the rest of us, waiting for its shot. At fulfillment. At vengeance. However you wish to phrase it. But the fact remains, it is not the same as anything else. And it will try to sabotage the whole when the whole is off monkeying around in its Buick. Note the seed at the center of the root mass. It is brown because there is no better color to represent the Aristotelian mean. It is, therefore, a substance leaning neither too far in one direction, nor too far in the other. Unless, of course, the sky has been unusually vengeful. Even then, there are limits to how much

ice can form on any particular surface if it possesses angles of more than forty degrees. This should keep us off the rosters, keep us shuffling along the sidewalk when our friends and neighbors have disappeared. When they have been swallowed up by that particularly brutal form of anonymity that passes for contentment. One may engage in rearguard actions designed to put wine on the table, the blisters back in the flesh where they belong. But all is doomed to failure for the simple reason that nothing can succeed. It's been determined beforehand, like the Superbowl. Like quartz. It's the same for doomsday and black bread. And the insect population growing by mathematically-precise increments, indicating a sleight of hand not altogether sure of its dexterity. But why should anyone hedge his bets in such a way as to insure the face behind the mask is revealed as just another mask? For that matter, why insure anything at all if the catacombs themselves are full of stories? About the length of the bridegroom's nose or a leopard bounding about on the fire escape just when you'd become certain there were no more leopards anymore, only microfilm? We know these specters have nowhere else to go. They show up without warning when the window is open, when the curtains need dusting and the hospital is a hundred miles away. Still, there must

be an explanation. A settling of scores so enormous even those thirsting most for vengeance write the whole thing off as improbable. A suicide scenario ripped off from the screenplay of *To Have and Have Not*. Reproach echoes through the chambers of his brain. Even as it is endeavoring to transplant itself to Mexico. To those shores where the light of the stars reminds one of what it means to be alive. To be happy. Because the stars are so far away. And maybe we each have, then, inside us, an invalid. Someone who strains to re-capture the past. The way you might pluck a frog from the river. If we turn away from his coughing, we find others at the periphery. No less inclined to make us feel the windows have been broken. And the alarm cut off, allowing the inmates to pour through. They urge one another on until it's too late for breakfast. And too early to start choosing candidates for election. Deification. And revenge. Put simply, the past is something you need to handle gently, like a Gila monster. Otherwise, you'll wind up wishing it never existed. That it showed up at someone else's door. And waited there patiently in the rain. While you were busy unwrapping presents and ignoring the only mother you ever had. Because she seemed like someone's idea of a modernist painting. With pastiche and ivy borders. Hence the name. The birds can be trusted to come in off the

ocean. Like rumors. The kind that make the guilty shake their heads. Because they are afraid. Of the sky. Of the water. They are afraid of that moment when we know we are nothing. It comes when we are folding laundry. When the wind scratches at the window. Every precaution, every tale we've told in the meantime trying to avoid that moment, trying to run away from it like children from a dog, falls apart. And the body sheds itself, leaving a new one just like the old one. Only brighter. What they say when pressured, when the plane is going down and everyone has gathered around the one man with a tape recorder, leaving reminiscence and fond farewells to loved ones -- snatches of autobiography -- it all sounds strangely familiar. What you'd come up with if you were to jot something down between lectures. And jazz it up in places so as to impress whatever dominatrix happens to be sharing your life at the time. Of course, all of this is apt to change into something clandestine and unfair. A way for total strangers to say exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. Just as if we had all turned into functionaries of some sort. And we knew what was expected of us. And we obeyed it to the letter. This is why it's best to travel without a hat. In case someone were to approach you and begin singing. Old standards. Fairly new arrangements. The kind of thing that

brings tears to your eyes precisely because you know it's inappropriate. It will make you appear overly sensitive to ridicule and that nihilism that hangs above us like a pear. People will speak of you then in whispers, and those of such measured proportion, even the whisperers themselves will have a difficult time making them out. They will come to the conclusion that the subject has been exhausted once and for all. By virtue of its toxicity. Its humble, even unpardonable, origins. You pursue a certain activity all your life -- bowling, say, or the translation of Hindi -- without ever fully understanding it. The deadlines come and go and the owners of the restaurant quiz on particulars. But the whole of it, the grand scheme and high art of the endeavor, elude you the way the actual mores of her Bedouin host eluded Lady Hester Stanhope perched atop her camel, the desert moving past as though on rollers. And her own high opinion of herself as much a part of the landscape as the vipers. Tension comes not from the sidelines where people observe and comment because they are getting paid by editors who don't care what the story is, just so long as it incorporates antelope or swordsmen, or even plumbers, for color. No, what worries us is our own failure to grasp the minutiae just when our eyes have been opened by failed love affairs. Or twenty years practicing the craft the way

others plug away at careers. You've heard the stories of families trapped indoors by retreating armies. Grizzly bears. The kind of thing that makes the weak or practical reconsider their choice of location. Their love of those they see around them every day. But the accident of birth is no longer an accident, really. Not since we've changed what may rightfully be assigned to fate and what left rather to the unruly nature of our molecules. This obligation comes at you dressed so casually those who recognize it won't admit anything under questioning. They draw pictures with this feature stolen from their nephew, that from their mother, producing, in the end, the kind of send-up intellectuals are famous for. Tremendous energy always winds up finishing like that. No matter what form it takes initially. The whole of it disintegrating, spending itself like dollar bills on vacation. Then, one day, when they call you a dangerous eccentric while you are eating breakfast, you see the pelicans skim the tops of the waves. And the airliners, far out over the ocean. In the glare of the direct sunlight. Looking solid and small as dimes. You know you have degrees they don't give just anyone. You know your eyes protrude a little from the flesh and the skull. They look like those frogs that come up from nowhere when the weather turns soggy and the heat of the day is interrupted for maybe



an hour, maybe a week. Just enough time to go searching for those things that haven't been available. Enough time, in other words, to realize they could have been yours for the taking all along. If only you hadn't been so timid. Hadn't believed the advice you'd been given about when one is worthy of attention. And when one ought rather to pack his bags and head for the implacable mountains of Utah. It's only when the others have disappeared that you begin to understand. The umbrellas by the sea. The moans of the vanquished all along the shore. The occasional rocking chair. Rest assured it wasn't anywhere to be seen last winter when people were paying a very high premium indeed for that mode of relaxation. Perhaps because they had come to believe it would no longer be available now that the concept of age has been overthrown. Only to be replaced by the concept of isolation. Of living forever even when you long to die. This is what keeps us from straying too far from the precincts where we were born. Or where, at least, we've decided to send our children to schools that teach them the same basic principles we learned when we were children. First, don't kill harmless creatures, especially sea urchins, even when you've had a bad day. Don't confuse the dark night of the soul with that insomnia that comes of eating too much feta cheese. Even so, every day the thaw

seems further and further away. Until it is winter again and there is no such thing as light. Or reflection. Just a lumbering certainty today will be exactly like yesterday, in that it won't be so much like the day before you'd be willing to shoot yourself. Still, affirmation must come from somewhere. Otherwise, we'd never get anything done. We'd never erect bridges. Or find the diamonds in the holes we dig. It's this gets us discussing dread with people who have never really felt it. Or, if they have, it was after the manner of the diver who believes he is surfacing, even as he draws closer to the abysmal floor. The totality is disappointing, but the islands have everything you might desire. Puffins with sardines draped from their beaks in rows. Castaways practicing their piano fingering on keyboards carved into tortoise shells, the whole lot of them stumbling from one shady place to the next and in no hurry, it seems, to finish their Ravel. The classics can't compete with the navy, even one from Ecuador. So you best temper your expectations or you'll wind up in the hands of pirates who don't know what they're doing. Who insist ink cartridges and teeth are just as valuable as gold. It's the same misunderstanding that lands one on the market for a house when everyone else has grown accustomed to caves. They write articles about them that include interviews and tips on how and where to

hang your tapestries. Those with Custer in them. And those from as far away as Maine. Why we wind up with such things, though, when we'd rather have food, when we'd rather space our children out in increments of five years so that they learn from each other how to tie their shoes – all of this remains the kind of mystery no one else cares about anymore. The kind that isolates by its very existence. Even so, there are some things we know by induction. The spinal column, for instance, has its origins in the mud. In the movement and early bad luck of the crayfish. When it didn't look exactly like it does today. Similarity might be sufficient to get it included in the textbooks, though. In an appendix. Or after the discussion on pomegranates and why they grow where they grow. When they grow at all. Agents don't have to operate in a secretive manner. In fact, they don't have to be agents at all. Recipient is just as noble an occupation. And if he insists on looking for something else, let no one assume it is because the position lacks esteem. Or the notes that go with it are scrawled in a childish hand. All the same, we aren't just wasting time. Throwing in with spies is exciting. They want us to believe music is something with transportation needs, that it can't just go from one place to another on the wind. The way it's made to seem at the opera. This is why the trains are ready at the station.

And the tractor trailers line up outside the gate. Of course, the spies, as is customary, come from West Virginia. They all went to the prom together. If you want in, you must pass muster. With their cousins. With mother and father. People who speak with one side of the lip pulled higher than the other. And their teeth showing through. Like the inside of a radio. The tubes, the transistors. That part where the voice whirls around inside until there's no way of knowing where it originated. And it's always like that. No matter who you are. Or when. Even Casanova understood what you've done is at least three times more important than why you decided to do it. His explanations work their orbit so far beyond the merely necessary, we begin to wonder if any of it is true. If he has really even been to Venice. If he has seen the same flesh we have, only he thought it wasn't flesh at all, but an art form. Recently invented. There are reminders in almost every millimeter of sky. When the snow comes out of the north. And the sun is not up, then, to its usual standards. People say we should know there are limits to our own happiness. And we should know where those limits go. Otherwise, we are miserable from the time we get up in the morning until the ballet suite comes out of the radio. The piece concerns vampires. The same old story – how they wind up chasing an immortality that looks strangely

like your ordinary housewife. This has nothing to offer those of us made acutely modern scoffing at the memory of Aleric. "The Raven" scares someone who sees ravens everywhere, but give him a year or two in junior college and he will know the difference between how we are frightened and why. I suppose the difference is less urgent, finally, than is the introduction. To other peoples. Especially the suave ones. To the bassoon. Say the tree man comes because he is called. Whoever makes that call does so out of a certain fear of trees and how they spread themselves. We too are forever looking for a mirror that isn't a mirror exactly. But something close enough to cause delirium in those who would peer into it. We see a nose. The markings on the skin that might have come together in the shape of a continent, say. If they hadn't been scattered in haphazard fashion. Simple dumb luck. There are days when no one is looking at anyone and what they see nevertheless is as pleasant as the marble they used to own when they were children. With the swath of fire frozen in the center. Like the pupil of some animal that has yet to be discovered. And perhaps we look because we are afraid that no one else is looking. That everything happens in a great black void. A universe of inattention. The birds feeding their boisterous young and the lovers sneaking off behind the shed. Where the grass is

certainly high enough but high enough for what? The rings of Saturn mock the telescopes and the machines attached to them. Throwing out numbers instead of puns. Instead of the awe one was taught in school comes from a sense that we are smaller than we think we are. Like the man who discovers letters written by his wife to others. Even if they are not what he first suspected. But simple vehicles of information. A list of household items. Toothbrushes. Powdered lemonade. The songs she remembers on the radio when she was a child and the songs seemed to carry a hidden message she would stay up half the night to recover. When we are aged, though, and know better than to look for the sign in the middle of anything, we take the trees down because they are in the way. Which is as good and precise a reason as any. And there in the middle, in spite of us, there are the shapes in the rings and the measurement. How many years of drought and how many years of plenty. The women, before they knew better, would wait for him in the laundry. Under the stairs. Chattering among themselves in a language without precedent. One so enamored of adverbs, it ceased to function. It settled to the bottom of the plate like molasses. And when you stuck your finger in, there was a moment when you wondered if you would ever get it out again. Or if

you'd be stuck there like the boy who wandered into a shed. Looking for his lost baseball cards. Eventually, for a mistress. Once he finds her, they lie around in caves all day, brushing the scorpions from their shoulders and trying to remember what a doorbell sounds like. Trying to conjure it from a past that has grown so dense and discolored, there is no distinguishing it from a lake where salamanders roam about on the bottom in search of love. And methane gas rises through the layers of cold water like those cellophane ghosts hung from piano wire in the Christmas pageants we rarely got to go to as kids. Because we didn't know anyone else in town. Or at least, we pretended not to know them. Because once you've made connections of even the most trivial sort, acquaintance without the least intimacy or knowledge of someone else's shoe size, you are obligated to mention these people in your prayers even when you don't believe anyone is listening. And you must acknowledge the pain their absence causes you once they are dead. If they have caught an exotic parasite on a cruise, say. A bug that doesn't even have a name on this side of the world. One we imagine as languishing somewhere in the body of a goat and then making its way to the human alimentary canal by virtue of its tenacity. Its remarkable good luck. When we are children, the stories make sense

because the earth seems altogether inevitable. What with the mountains and the outlaws in the mountains. To reject these things would be like closing one's eyes, going to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. When the other children have found an elephant by the river. One escaped, say, from the circus. They ride it from the tire swing to the gravel pit where someone is smoking cigarettes. And someone else has taken her top off in the backseat of a Chevelle. Getting what we desire is never as fulfilling, ultimately, as being denied. As any self-respecting banker will tell you when he is on the roof of a house where he doesn't belong, the lightning skipping about in the quadrants of the sky like eels. And the sound of the trombones carrying on the wind. He doesn't have to imagine what will happen. He doesn't have to dig deep in the moss-strewn and ammoniated cellar of his mind to pull out the necessary images. They are all presented beforehand by the forces of nature. By the habit the earth has of turning hallucination into bald fact. And then back again before the guests arrive. And if we are to reverse this process, if we are to make the actual behave as would the pet snake (in a pliant and taciturn manner), then we must forget everything we've ever heard. Regarding idealism. And that tendency of the childish mind to emulate and invent, rather than disappear. Like those primitives



who seem to be made out of leaves. But only when you approach with a degree of hostility, and they find it expedient to make use of the game trails. Of the tricks the shamans showed them once. At a competition. When the loser was forced to live in remote marshes, and eat toads and take for his wife a woman who otherwise might have gone on to remarkable achievements in law. In land grant acquisition. And the mapping of the Id. There will come a time when you stand before your own reflection, in a mirror that has never been to sea or market, and you will recite the long list of your failures like Iago, only backwards. And the whole world will love you without knowing what it's done. Without even recognizing the name. We must, I suppose, renounce our neighbors. Lure their Great Danes away. But we shouldn't enjoy it too much. Nor should we have to tell our children that they too will spend their days wishing it was some other day. Some other time forever in the future. Or last Tuesday. Or even right now, just so long as it doesn't seem like right now. The curtains, perhaps, could open off-center, above the divan. So that the light they let in doesn't harm your foot. Doesn't fall on it like an angry mob. If this is too much to ask, then maybe silence is our only option. Even it taxes somebody's patience. It has to. Otherwise, we'd be walking around all night. Nothing to do but take the

lids off the garbage cans or pull our own teeth out just to hear the sound of pleading. If only we knew what was in store for us when these notions first take hold, when they enter from outside like parasites one gets in the ears. We'd turn away from the table, take our ice cream and catalogues and run for the nearest overpass where you can watch the sun come up in line with the highway, centered perfectly certain days in October and drifting either left or right until it comes back around again in April, and you feel that sense of camaraderie with the Chaldeans and what they accomplished through simple observation of the heavens that might otherwise be mistaken for pride. Perhaps then this is all that is required: opening one's eyes after the fashion of someone else. And it doesn't have to be the ancients that hold us in thrall, just people other than ourselves, but people who actually exist, who see themselves as being no more composed of ink and paper than was Abraham Lincoln. Or, for that matter, the entire city of Berlin. I tend a fire in the rain and hope secretly it will go out. Pray for the end of illumination. And the desire that goes with it like knife and spoon. Surgeons must know their fumbling is directed fumbling or else how could they even enter the room? And yet, whose direction? And why? I imagine the blueprint soiled. Sporting coffee rings,

albumen, blood. And there at the bottom, a signature. Just like my own. Except for the q. Which is done with a flourish. A sweep so grand as to hide something. The way we hide abiding misery in snapshots of pelicans. A mile of sand. And so it sings us songs at night. Sends us women who love us the way they might love pillows. Or those stones that look like glass, that come up from the center of the earth with the lava, with the sulfur and, later, the snails. And we fall for it every time. We assume there are reasons hidden away in even the murkiest of waters. Explanations to keep the whole planet sane. At least for an hour. Between hiccups. Between the arrival of the locusts and their departure at noon. A week later. When we are used to them. When we have already written songs that contain their narrative. And the gloss upon their narrative. And those palliative measures the biologists suggested when they weren't too busy drinking beer. Or scratching at the backs of their hands. Rehearsing the literature on epidemiology. And Viola's options in Twelfth Night. The way they'd end it better. Your biography is no longer on the shelf. They have moved it to a back room where it sits in darkness. Hoping to fend off the snails. Others hover over the letters as though they've just discovered their value. Just realized you can hang them together like a necklace and people will pay

attention. If they are not already headed to play chess with an uncle they haven't seen in years. Because the bridge was out. Because we think ourselves fascinating and will not give in to demands. Mere mention of the weather sends everything in a different direction. Alters its composition. We've grown so subtle, even the bishops, the lion tamers, must fail to keep us alive. The question, then, is how do we remember the end before we get there? Turn impulse into action and we don't know what we've done? Or run the heart out on a clothesline where the wind will take care of it on its way to the poles? And we are holed up with Eugenie Grandet. I am reminded of the dread desert of childhood. Where cocker spaniels bound about at the edge of cemeteries. And the men grow their mustaches so as to have something to point to when the earth shifts beneath their feet. And no one else is looking. When no one else knows what the rest of us know. That the sea fits in a bottle. Tying yourself to the wrong end of things, though, just because it's part of your philosophy, part of that wisdom we pick up at college when we are picking up end tables and Modigliani to boot, is like shaking hands with a horse-shoe crab. It won't get you anywhere. And yet, who can resist? Standing in line, waiting for a geography lesson, one comes to the conclusion all pleasure is, in fact, selfish. Though the

event isn't exactly marked by fireworks. By peonies. Because there is the mortgage to consider. And the black bear waiting by the Volvo. It models itself on certain literary notables. Not those who compose but those who are composed. Who put on their russet outlines and despicable habits through the industry of someone else's fingers. And if we are to be included, if we are to rank as more than just an afterthought, a sixth course following the strawberries, we had better dust our hearts off. Clean them in between the creases. And then maybe the rewards will begin to seem like rewards. Rather than those gift bags they give at banquets. Where the guests know one another by appearance and reputation. But are still unsure which one has the fungus. And which one won the Tony for her performance in ... Well, she wasn't in anything, really, I might have heard of. And this is why she calls after midnight. And whispers those intimacies that make me feel uneasy. Because how would you feel if your thighs were described as highways? And your mouth a ready source of inflammation? Afflicted with toothache, we think it both problem and solution, an emblem of that misery that makes us aware. Of the passage of time. Of the need for time to stand still on occasion like a horse should you want to get on its back. Or better yet, should you want to get down

again so as to be able to go about your business without having to smell like an animal. We are forever worried about contamination. About the world's ability to intrude itself upon our boundaries and turn us into something we weren't to begin with. Though why we should find this inherently unpleasant has yet to be explained. Even by Ovid when he was turning beautiful women into laurel trees and other people into other things like wolves and pomegranates. Maybe we believe we are pure in the original. That our matter has not come from the soil and the flesh of the things we consume. But from itself, like lead. And any admixture is bound to water it down, to lessen the effect by virtue of there being two things where before there had been simply one. If so, then we are suffering illusion. The way sailors sometimes thought they saw beautiful women on the waves. And when they sailed up close so as to salute them, to profess a kind of love, they found there merely sea cows bobbing on the current. Eyeing them blankly with weeds in their teeth. The lever insures there are other ways of spending your time than just contemplating the lever. You can pull it and see what happens. Of course, it was placed on the wall by someone who didn't realize it would be such a difficult decision. The catalyst, if you will, for long nights between sleep and

dreaming. We long for periods of tranquility like those reportedly accorded families in Ceylon. And this is characteristic of all human beings. The ability to complain as the maple syrup arrives via post and we are just minutes away from Venice. The gilded rooms where an emperor lost his mind. Not once, but twice, in quick succession. Then hovered over his subjects like a bower bird, just because he could. He knew the light that finds us in the evening is not the same as that which illuminates the cave. Assuming you bring it with you. Because if you don't, there's no finding your way out again. Whether you have the memory of a mathematician or no. The memory of one of those shamans who first ventured down there with a basket full of crayons – or their stone age equivalent. Pitch and chalk soaked in blood. Whatever would assist him in making the other world visible. Even when there was no other world. The filthiest jokes originate in the minds of children. Bubble up like fumaroles. And it's only when the adults eavesdrop at the door that they make their escape. They pour out into the wide world like marionettes before there was television. Dancing and skipping about and making their bows on a stage that is strangely level. The sort of thing, in other words, that, when you see it out of its element (like an albatross on the overpass), seems like it was intended to

send a message. This is why sealskin coats are no longer in fashion. Why you can't get one even if you were to order it special from the Lapps. Who, we're told, suffer no qualms about separating one thing from another. You've experienced, no doubt, that crippling desire that somehow makes the world multiply. That turns itself into its own opposite the way slender snakes emerge from oval eggs. But this firsthand introduction isn't likely to settle in precisely because it leaves no place to settle. It polishes surfaces down to their purest state. And we are left with accidents and art works that might once have seemed to herald the end of the world. But now make of that world something like a washcloth. You have merely to wipe your eyes with it to dispel your most stubborn terrors. Or, if you prefer, you may eliminate it altogether. You can bury it under the piles of oyster shells and old envelopes that clutter up your desk. Often, the image belongs, because it is cerebral, to the world of excuses. Of Okavango-like swamps we penetrate with the machete when the inner tube might be more appropriate. Nothing is liable to get in your way, at any rate, when you travel in this fashion. But it's not the wildlife that concerns us. Nor the vegetable matter that wraps itself around your arms, around the vanity mirror dropped off by settlers before they had to



return. It's the flush that comes of humiliation. That sense we have that the laughter is not aimed in vague directions. It is concentrated in the veins. It feels there like someone coring melons. Or the sensation one has of falling through empty space when, in fact, one is falling. But the space itself is cluttered with any number of things that might have made a difference. The stationary. The open doors that let out onto balconies of the sort one dreams of when one is apt to dream at all. It's like when you stumble on the perfect painting, involving the Lord of Hosts, say, stroking his beard in obvious glee. Because He has made things happen this way. He has turned the familiar world of tea sets and antiseptic dread into a place where you fall down the stairs regularly. Where there is always someone nearby to witness it. And yet, when you go to set this down (convinced of your own genius, or at least your right to subversive brush strokes given where you've been, who once loaned you a nickel) there is a blown transformer. A flood of butterflies and trombones rending the air. This is, of course, coincidence. But when you roll over so as to explain it to your wife, already the mud is on the bed. Tracked in by animals. Badgers, say. Or just the thought of badgers, which is not a pleasant one. It too deserves its exile. The image it evoked remained fixed no matter what others did to try to

replace it. The backgammon sets delivered on Christmas Eve. The alpine vacations. It's astonishing, really, how stubbornly we hold to our original views. Drawing mustaches on the photographs of men who threaten to become pioneers in the field we ourselves chose as undergraduates. Cryptozoology might seem the perfect solution then. A compromise hashed out over roast boar and a plate of muscatel grapes. But don't be fooled by the ease with which you settle into that agreement. Because someone is going to show up at the back door, guaranteed. And insist on examining your credentials. And then, what will you have? A strand of hair from some beast that clearly wasn't at its best come January. A phone number for someone in Centerville. Better to tend the rice paddies when the rain is a day late than gawk all night at those illustrations that make of the natural world something ineluctably human. The cormorant poking its head out between the bars of a bamboo cage. The look on its face so consistently malignant you'd think the thing was running for mayor. And still, we follow those lines with our mind. Until the lines blur into something ovoid and without meddle. The exact opposite of what it first set out to be. Which can only mean our sense organs are in on it. An inside job, so to speak. A treachery so all pervasive even the

venerable town widows may be excused if they turn tail and run. If they use whatever time remains to them trying to sort out what could have become of their voices. Ahiqar, famed counselor at the court of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, warns of idle gossip, stating that our words are like songbirds and parrots. Once loose, we can never get them back again. They head for the coast where there are plenty of trees in which to hide. And fruit and seeds to keep them nourished. Of course, people are apt to shoot at them along the way. Especially those who have nothing better to do because they have been kicked out of trade school for various misdemeanors committed on campus. In broad daylight. Just as if they thought they might be invisible and only the rarest form of clairvoyance would allow the authorities to track them. It is a self-deception, a trap, we all fall into on occasion. A way of treating ourselves without resorting to mud baths. Or those confections that cost an arm and a leg. It is a good-natured fib that winds up changing the course of history. At least so far as we experience it. Which is, of necessity, limited. We can't see the triremes plowing the waves from this distance. We can't imagine the sound of Charles the Eighth's voice. So we decide it's probably best just to keep ladling out the oatmeal. Keep reassuring the children their hamster is

coming back. Oh, he might look a little different. And bite them on the finger now and then. But any suspicions they harbor about his ultimate identity are really nothing more than paranoid delusions. Spawned by too much time spent in the abandoned mines around our neighborhood. Looking for skeletons, I suppose. Or the odd vein of silver. The dizziness may be attributed to vinegar, to that way we have of looking up at things that exist far away. Or that we imagine existing far away, like puppets. Up close, you can see the fabric and the place where the hand goes in. The void, if you will. The center. But your eyes might ache then and your ears grow so spongy, not even your brothers will recognize you. They'll bar the door, go screaming for the bathroom as if they'd seen the same enormous lizard that used to haunt their dreams after they'd been to the drive-in. And the women they married materialized one after another. Stepped out of the fabric of bowling leagues and missionary trips as if they'd had no reality of their own. But simply lived within the confines of such endeavors the way we contemplate suicide without even knowing it's there. How we behave in ways that can not be explicated except by experts who forged their credentials. This is what gets us clapping at commercials for cough syrup, shouting our Akhbars at the owls on the pine. That it reveals itself

through commas and nothing more, that it hibernates half the winter in magazines and erupts to the surface only when the moon exports its loathing, does not mean, however, that we are its slaves the way we are enslaved by vice or crucifixes or those orange candies with cream in the middle. We are human beings and, as such, must learn to accept that not everything we do is written down in a book ahead of time. Some of it just happens. It just stumbles into view for no good reason, like the anteater making its rounds. You can address the letters to whichever deity seems most responsive. They have an office for that sort of thing, but I'm not sure where's it's located. Probably in Tacoma, for reasons we don't need to get into here. The wheat is still a problem for those who are newly introduced to it and those who have no idea what they consume on a day to day basis. They just approach that part of their lives the way you might a hobo. Or a man who claims to have learned how to breathe underwater. He means, of course, without assistance, but the team has been looking into his past and found that, while there are whole weeks spent in the neighborhood of the Galapagos Islands, there are other periods unaccounted for -- if you mean by that term some sort of disappearance on par with Amelia Earhart's, just not as enduring. I've heard several different versions of the

song they made to commemorate the birth of one dictator or another, but never something as joyful as what they've rolled out this season. A mix of reggae and political discourse that puts everything else in its category to shame. That's why we must evacuate or risk becoming the kind of casualty that doesn't even know how to spell the word. How to use it with élan in his final exams. He winds up desperate and alone on a bus that isn't even going in the right direction. It pulls into the casino parking lot and only then does he realize the world is not contingent in any meaningful way, but is, rather, a funhouse mirror with so many scratches on the surface from overuse, it no longer distorts. It seems, in fact, as accurate as a camera. Who else should remember your favorite saint? Who should follow the advice given by Asoka to people who didn't speak his language? Maybe the fruits of the universe are just so much soil. And a brand name sweater you get for your birthday when you were hoping for claret. For the sound of trumpets coming from down the street where the musicians huddle around fire pits and smoke cigarettes they've rolled themselves. Or they stole from the drugstore that just opened up. Either way, they are asking for a type of notoriety that just isn't available anymore. That dried up with the desert winds Steinbeck told us so much about

when he was actually trying to tell us about other things. The symptoms of despair. The inflammation, the side effects like insomnia and the strange sense that you are sleeping all at the same time. The worry this causes like someone hanging over the front of a boat so as to see the fishes fly past underneath. Or just the mussels. The occasional car frame looking like leviathan if it were more than a bit sluggish. If it were the kind of legend that gets told in the elementary schools now, about the violin and how expensive it is. How the man who made it wished his entire life he had asked a woman to marry him. But chose instead to walk the other way on the sidewalk whenever he saw her approaching. And the reason for this is as clear as the light in the window when you are just waking up in the morning. When you are lying there, still as a piece of paper: He was afraid. The ash tree has had a rough go of it, if you believe the rumors started by people who don't even know what it looks like. How it plays in the history of our state. The cult status, though, is undeserved. It causes some of us to re-evaluate our own circumstances. How we wound up with The Enneads in the trunk. Why the spouse tastes like licorice when she probably ought to be completely tasteless. At least that's what is implied whenever the clouds hover overhead like interior organs. And the entire

valley is cast into shade. It might seem noble in other jurisdictions, but here just reminds us of how little in common we have with even those we say we love. Those we spend our lives with like remoras. And immortalize in verse no one is going to read because it is much too dense. Or else it cuts at us and distorts the view like a broken windshield. It reminds one of the story of Jung's animus. It woke up one morning to discover it wasn't vivid anymore, wasn't lit from within. And so it castrated itself with a lyre. The same applies to Isherwood among the Quakers -- we are always harking back to some other place, pining away for it as if we'd been dragged off in manacles. And forced to choose between bouillabaisse and those doughy abominations that pass for sustenance on the plains. The implications are clear: Either we dress for the part and play loose with the details or we invite complete strangers to stay in the guest room at a flat rate similar to that suggested by the guidebooks. Of course, you can author one of these if you'd rather, but the royalties are so skimpy as to mean you'll be hard pressed to feed your family. This is why the family is in decline if you believe reports circulating just now in Albania. Those relying on figures that couldn't possibly be explained by the climate (which is mostly sunny, so I'm told, though my interlocutor is of a sanguine temperament



himself and so not to be trusted) unless you take into consideration the leopard frogs which have lungs of such enormous capacity, anything is possible. A total re-alignment of the heavens according to which planet is most similar to our own. An elimination of all sense of not belonging. That curse that follows us from the chemistry lab to the bedroom, twining its subtle body about our limbs, stealing the breath right from the nostrils. Until we're positive the feeling is not altogether of the imagination but must come from somewhere absolute, like the bottom of a gorge. Or the Stygian wilds you hear so much about when you are nowhere near them. This just goes to show we have yet to learn the lessons the herons have, those that allow them to stand motionless and alone for hours on end without ever once wondering, it seems, whether there is any point to their endeavors. Whether anyone will ever mistake them for citizens again. We know we wind up alone. We know it as certainly as we know our own zip code. Or the recipe for a cheesecake. And yet, we can't abide the necessity of it. The brute fact of it lumbering up at us from out of the forest. Everywhere you turn, something will be growing on something else. The moss hanging from the bones of boy scouts. And their leaders, who put too much trust in the compass. And not enough in the Pensees of

Pascal. You see the same thing in one discount shop after another. The patrons eyeing each other like roosters. And the wind beating against the windowpanes. Until there's nothing left to separate the true ideas from those that are merely feasible. I suppose one must expect a drop in intensity when the shoes don't fit. When one's eyebrows look as though they are on loan from a museum. That one where the elephant is three times larger than average. We expect the wonders of the world to stay in their proper place like children. To leave us alone at least until we've had our blintzes. But where is it written our boundaries belong to us? That the skin of our forearms is somehow other than the salt breeze? The coral snake hiding under leaves? Osmosis is an ontological concept, a foreshadowing of the crisis to come. When you don't know if your eyes are organs of perception. Or simply jewelry to be worn about the head. Not by their owner, but by the gods in their heavens. In their easy chairs. This is why geysers don't excite us. Unless, of course, we've been too long in the wine country. Among the truck drivers and their Arapaho wives. Our sense of expectation dulled by mystery novels or too many olives. Nevertheless, you can bet there are masterworks out there, hung on walls. On hooks, like constellations. They have names that don't mean anything, that send us, curious, off

on red herrings, on hopeless adventures from which we might return in an hour or a day. Convinced finally we've found the pay-off. Or something very like a pay-off. A penultimate Thule. The rush is toward some final precipice. Though to admit the other side is just empty air is like staying at a hacienda, where they pull potatoes from the ground. And fry them. You can spot the imposters. Count them on two hands. But that still won't give you an accurate idea of how many there are in between. In those places where we don't know for sure what we believe. Though, occasionally, we know why we believe it. And yet, the cardinals come to the back porch just as they did in the old days. When certainty was something you couldn't afford. Any more than you can afford now the seed for those cardinals and their companions. The mailed armadillo. The wood rats. They seem to think morning is something that belongs to them. And they must wrest it away from those of us who aren't sure anymore if our deeds entitle us to even so much as a stump. Of course, one must still worry about the wires in the lamp. Whether they'll start an argument that sends the wall up in flames. Whether they'll return to their former shape and make-up. Like accountants playing basketball or sucking their thumbs. Such is Donald Duck's dangerous idea. The notion that your speech is the

defining factor. Your impediments, in reality, your grand designs. It's a stroke worthy of the finest minds and yet, we reject it because its author is plagued by lice. Because the shape and nature of our own failures rarely seem redeemable in the mirror. They hang on us like a painter's smock. And the oak in the table, the skin on the hand of the nun, tell us that we are only just beginning to realize the extent of our misery, our degradation, when the doorbell rings and the mind drifts in fresh directions. This is why, come morning, we feel as if the world is all emeralds and mahogany. While at night, it's made of styrene and stinks like the mottled ape. What we fear is regression, that going back along the vine to the pumpkin and lying there until the frost comes. Or the vermin who chew through the middle, looking for the seed without realizing that's what they're after. This is what some people call "teleology" when they favor overly technical terms, instead of simply calling something what it first appears to be. Like "asparagus", which harbors the shape its name refers to. In the leaves, if not the fleshy part. This is not the case, though, with a name like "Rhododendron", which no doubt refers to some city in the Netherlands, and so complicates needlessly any search for the nature of the thing itself. We begin to wonder if the entire catalogue of names and places and historical events

might not best be understood as an invention that served some purpose the moment it was invented, but has since gone the way of the Canada goose. Which is to say it is not extinct, by any means, but not exactly welcome either, in those neighborhoods where people enjoy a stroll by the lake. Where they have to clean their shoes afterward, and fend off the occasional aggressive bird with the sharp end of an umbrella. The spell at the center of the fable didn't always require the passage of years. But there was usually some blood involved. Or a stand-in, like champagne, when you had nothing better. The reason no one believes in these things anymore is because they have seen with their own eyes the way power undoes itself as a matter of course. Even the wind, when it makes its appearance, produces a feeling of surprise akin to that you'd feel should Achilles walk through the front door. And compose an ode on your wife. It's then we promise to be kinder to friends. To allow them the part of the hero when they tell the tale. Despite what we know about their sexual proclivities. Their tendency to strike out at shadows. And yet, for all that, we fail, because the will does not belong to us. It's like Emily Bronte cauterizing her own dog bite. A self-sufficiency nearly obscene. If, however, there are favors involved, if, for instance, the oysters are plentiful and the townhouse

free for the weekend, then we can not be blamed for what happens. Any more than you can hold a man accountable for the size, for the pitch and character, of his ears. Cover it all up with plastic, keep the hydrants in proper working order, and still, there will come a time when you don't know your own name or how you got here. A time when the geology is sacrosanct but the geometry a lie. Squares turn into circles which turn into still more circles until the very concept is relegated to the brush pile where, if you have a dollar thirty-eight and a mule, you can cart it away with you just so long as you do it after dark. Otherwise, the people in the neighborhood close by will begin to think that they too have a right to the cast-off surfaces. The shapes and the centipedes which might, however, have something to say about just where they end up. And with whom. And by "say" I mean, of course, an envenomed response. A tickling of nerve fibers with twenty or more enzymes and a something that sounds like bells. The careful route is the one preferred, as well, by Scylla when she doesn't remember her role. When the branches heavy with dates and hummingbirds tell us the world is no longer the one we remember from childhood. But rather one so adorned with fragrant and aggressive things we have no chance of knowing its true nature. We stumble from wood mice to

Frederick Barbarossa to the pies made with lemon juice because the chefs leave nothing to chance, and we never get a sense of who first bothered to write down the names of the bushes. The elderberry and spruce that divine the end of time and would tell us about it if they could. If they had mouths to speak or the inclination to spoil our illusions. But they are too mild, I suppose. Or else the rumors about them are true, and we are better served imagining a suit of armor animated by its own lack of interior, its own inability to fill the space at its center, than we are to trust too closely the opinions of those who have been in touch with the almanac. With a spirit of the times that seems to believe whatever it hears on a boat. One overrun, say, with card sharps. With a host of dubious origin. And how they write it all down! After a fashion, in their minds, with the assistance of those mnemonic devices people invent to do better on tests. It's all for the purpose of vengeance, I suppose. And accounting. The very skills that make us human. Best to turn everything outward. To amass great mounds of detritus, so as to be certain whatever crushes us does so from without. And our last moments may be comfortably spent in the contemplation of things we have never really seen before. The armadillo's pelt. The chipped gray paint of the sextant. The regret is not the same they speak of in museums. When

the catalogue has been prepared ahead of time, its shipment delayed by changes in the weather. Those that might otherwise seem like accidents. Like topics for conversation. You look them up with the help of an assistant who knows you have no interest in the ballet. But you show up there almost every morning. You press your nose against the glass in hopes of discovering a confidante. Enormous vats of jelly. These secrets are poorly kept. Even the public is aware. They parade about in the middle of the day, go from one point to the next as if they have every right to be wherever they wish to be. Like taproot. And there is no convincing them otherwise. Even if you were to play back the tape of their lives -- the missed opportunities, the non-sequitors and the mindless gawking after strangers. It would all seem like just so much ordinary adventure. Allotted to someone else. Someone who vacuums the pool the way we do. Who shears the sheep. But knows nonetheless there are moments to hold aloof. And moments when you must act as if your mind is attached, by ancient mechanism, to the sun. To fig trees. To the gaudy birds of the Marquesas. Rather than something as prosaic and disappointing, something as ultimately untenable, as the body. And this is the trouble with morning. Everything's wet. Grass blades. Jumping spiders eyeing the world for



something to bite. The telescope you leave out on the back porch when you can't find Neptune. You stumble inside to bed, not so much drunk as furious. Confounded yet again in your efforts to better yourself through education. Even so, a red shift is noticeable. Dread is gnawing at the neighbors. Has infiltrated the high school football team. Their fear corrodes the things it touches. Makes us reconsider club membership while the squirrels are scampering about in our attics. We must try poison. The drawback to any such frontal approach, though, is everyone will see it coming. The element of surprise (which is a heavy element and itself prone to corrosion) abandons you before you've had the chance to read up on the prophets. To drop them into conversation the way you might drop rocks into a lake. Why worry about the stickers in the doll's hair? Those that turn the world into something trivial merely by showing up. By drawing attention to the side issues and away from the true concerns of the hockey players? They are, after all, focused primarily on that passage in Zadig where everyone goes in search of the basilisk. As if this were the only object worth seeking in the entire cosmos. Perhaps because it possesses magical properties. Or because it would look good in the living room, next to the fireplace. Claim unique status among the bird watchers. Among those who tie discarded

feathers into their hair as a way of identifying with their quarry. Be on guard, though, against any legislation that makes us descendants of Cain. Or at least his look-a-likes. His stand-in at the lectern. People are lined up around the block just to get a glimpse of what had once seemed impossible. The perfect specimen. The sample of de-ratiocinated human nature let loose on itself and therefore expected to be modest. They no longer feel isolated and inconsolable, as has been reported. Yet there are some who spend entire summers digging up the caves in New Mexico. The Far East. All in an attempt to document what we've suspected from the start. That we were capable at one time of flight. And have since become slow, belligerent. Like the tuning fork repeating its pitch. I've run across fourteen different versions of the anecdote without ever meeting, in person, its victim. All suggest the climax might work better if it went the other way around. Starting with the gossamer and mounting to the ears until you can't tell the difference between who steals the money and who simply finds it lying on the ground. But does this give us the right to interfere? To broaden horizons by narrowing the ceiling and pushing at the edges of the sea with a device ordered specifically for that purpose? And, unfortunately, not available today for closer examination. Otherwise, I'd invite everyone to the far

end of the tent and proceed just as if twenty years hadn't passed in the manner they had. As if the notion of a year itself was the same from one person to the next, rather than something that changes its demeanor at the first opportunity. Like those men who say they wish for nothing more than to rule the world, but who are really so meek and lonesome their bones are liable to break at the slightest provocation. Touch such men once and they turn to dust. Our iniquities are not what they've been made to seem in the past. A catalogue of gorgeous flaws one must cover up with acrylic paint. With phrases from Ezekiel made obsolete with the invention of the toaster oven. We forever hold out against the apple blossoms, like Turks waiting for their new calendar. For the pavement to open up and disgorge the wood doves in their thousands. And all the while, the truly brilliant children are raised up in white and yellow smocks. They are delivered to the physician with pain behind the eyes and will not open their mouths for cotton candy. For the prayers that include all souls but their own. Why we will not take credit for what has been accomplished – even for something as simple as the sewing machine – is one of the great mysteries of mankind. Right up there with why we keep seeing explorers from other planets. Why we can't seem to sleep at night without conjuring the past. As if it

were a mineral the ingestion of which is necessary to our very survival. Like nickel. We ought really to be studying the Aegean, I suppose, or the complex pedigree of the Exmoor pony, instead of spending all our time trying to remember where we were last Tuesday. Or how a favorite aunt, while spitting puns and drinking brandy, managed to stumble into the river and drown. No more medicine left. None that might undo the searing pain, at any rate, the nausea that comes of illuminating manuscripts, of tossing things out, like the water in the catch of the de-humidifier, the stuff that turns a pleasant color just as soon as it hits the ground, but reminds one of bile in the meantime, of every anxious moment we spend in the company of others, the certainty that we will not remain their friends. In fact, the concept itself is infected and drives the least aficionado to spasms; before he knows it he has been turned into something other than what he intended to be, like an antelope's head on someone's wall, or the sort of Ubermensch that has too frequently been invented. Some fool will insist the argument isn't complete unless there is talk of the center. By which he means, of course, the place that isn't the circumference. And isn't on the agenda of those who convened the meeting in the first place. When this happens, calmly excuse yourself from the room. And wander away to

the Alps. But not those in Europe, because their dimensions are already so familiar, you won't be able to escape a thing. You'll be locked up the way they locked up pensioners in Syracuse when they thought there was some dangerous Pythagorean nonsense afoot. And even the least likely citizen was apt to be so deep in the middle of it, his eyes would turn green. Of course, there were lots of people who already sported that color. But the innocent were no more spared the energies of the tribunal than if they'd been a coven of witches caught red-handed snatching children from their beds. And making of them over-wrought works of art. The kind you see in museums to this day. When the curator doesn't know any better. He ships out entire crates full of the native crochet, the wickerwork and the painted soda bottles. And then he leverages the place for a couple of trinkets Chagall might have let fall from his pockets. We have resorted to serious tales about the mountains. And why people feel so strongly about them. And what happens when they're forced to leave. Dreadful bloodless stuff fit for schoolmarms, I suppose, but not the rest of us, who'd rather take up snakes and dance with them on the mossy promontories. Or rub gelatin on the back as a way of reducing the hirsute tendencies passed down from people who didn't even know they possessed them. Who took the

news as badly as if they'd been broken on the wheel themselves. And were left to molder in the sun while everyone else remained free to shop for necessities. To stroll on past with taffy in their hands. They couldn't quite square what they were seeing with those portraits of men (in gold frames, mind you) that littered the street. That stood in some places twelve feet high. Whatever minor details pass us by in the night, though, are re-kindled, I suppose, next morning. When we are young again and in love. At least that's what the man said to me when he came to the door and wondered out loud about my soul. Which is, of course, no business of his. Unless he can demonstrate legitimate cause for concern. Which is an easy enough matter, once you put your mind to it. Once you decide, in other words, all deserts may be crossed. There is the little matter of Chianti. The absolute madness concerning women who study the Buddha. Their braces. There is that thing for the Viennese. Of course, our only hiding place is in the drier, until the babysitter's sweater gets wet. And then what are you going to do to make amends? One gets to worrying so thoroughly about the climax, the opening is neglected. And there are people who will say to you then, I don't follow. I don't understand why the oysters open up down the middle and let their treasures spill. All the while

behaving as if they have no say in the matter. As if their best interests somehow revolve around the railroad, how it bullies its way through the swamp like a man who was orphaned at eight. Or the former chanteuse they made a movie about when most people were still fascinated by the dirndl. In the movie, she is an old lady and spends entire days talking about the sound of the beating heart. The abject, spongy taste of her lover's ear. The Roman soldier was no more impressed than is the modern schoolboy huffing glue on the cliffs with his friends. He sees the universe in roughly fifty colors, the gradations between them rounded off at the corners by a mind that has naturally seen enough. It can not be expected to take everything in because there is so much of everything. It will have to thin itself out with a garage sale or resort to the strategies employed by the royals of one country or another – maiming their second cousins, throwing idiot progeny into dungeons without pretext, a bottle of wine. In the meantime, the wind suits immodest thought. It touches the building like an enormous hand. You know the sound from its happening before, about a thousand times since you were a child and your imagination was such the teachers were afraid. And even your parents threatened to send you away, to put you in a school where no one was allowed to

shout or drink milk, no one was allowed to stand up more than two or three times a day. All in hopes such rough and unnatural usage would turn the pupils into modern-day equivalents of Archimedes himself. And maybe his last words weren't as sublime as those of some others. And maybe they were. Who knows? It's hard to determine without resorting to a calculus that doesn't involve numbers. That doesn't involve those circles that beg to be disturbed. Secrets lie buried in the jawbone. It is crushed by sand and seven million years of camels walking by. Until someone stumbles upon it jutting out and recognizes it is more important than it looks. Like those paperbacks with barbarians on the cover. And ornate caves. Or the plastic spoons that materialize seemingly from out of nowhere. At picnics. Spas of the cheaper variety. It's as if we no longer trust the simplest things to be themselves. They must carry weight, significance around with them, like constellations. You see people at the pharmacy reading the labels with a spy glass, calculating the meaning of each ingredient as though it were the preface to a Russian novel. And even the clock must become as uncanny as Joan Crawford's eyebrows, allowing for the passage of time without bearing the brunt of that passage. Otherwise, there are whole neighborhoods in danger of becoming nothing more than a



bunch of houses, where people raise their children to be polite and aggressive at the same time. They can't decide which is more essential. They hedge their bets. They light candles to Baal in the back room and fluff the pillows. They spend too much money on fried chicken. I seem to have lost my notes on the extinct Mako, says the one, patting himself about the pockets and removing his shoes while the canoe veers dangerously close to the eddies and whirlpools that mark the end of civilized territory. The beginning of those places we have yet to name. Because the names have all been taken already. By cities that could have gotten along without them. Consider the prosperity. The nearly identical layouts and habits of the inhabitants. The proliferation of glues. Industrial strength. Familial. Consider them indicative of the fate that awaits the individual. When he is much too fond of sand, of the cactus that grows in it. And the liquor that comes of that. We've seen what happens when you swallow the contents of bottles with no label. They are easily enough identified by the cork that stops up the neck. You have to use your nose, of course, but this just means it won't go to waste. Like your arms. Or the geometry skills that might have come in handy that day when we had to cross the river on foot. And the current was such the draftsmen made their excuses. They left us with a gift of

persimmons and the local women who tied their hair together, and prayed. We are always out to change the mind of the past while allowing that of the present to slide by unmolested like an otter. Or one of those paddlewheel steamships with its mechanism on the side rather than the stern. Where it can only serve to make a ruckus. To stir up the silt and the cadavers that might otherwise make their way downstream without ever once being detained along the way. Without spilling their secrets to the pathologist who gathers them up dutifully and then goes home to a wife who complains that there is never enough money to refurbish the kitchen. To send their daughters to dance class where they would certainly, if given the chance, excel. This path is not always going to be obvious, though, from your height. Shrink a little and you'll see exactly where the others have been headed. And you can imagine, then, why they lit out on the journey to begin with. Something to do with the Articles of Confederation. Their authors twirling their mustaches. The bluebirds mimicking the sparrows as best they can. But who wants to be fooled in this manner? Who will admit to glancing away just when the pivotal moment occurred? When the outlaws decided to give themselves up before the sheriff recruited their daughters, their high school English teacher. Who was even then a bit skeptical

as to the figure they'd cut in the world. Being familiar with all such plays, she chooses to vomit when the other side has the upper hand. Chooses to unleash torrents at will rather than face the implications of what her foes have to say. But, as her foes are neither handy nor particularly persistent in this stretch of the forest, when she finds herself reeling anyway, she can't help but imagine this is a sign of some sort. And she feels she must look about in the heavens or the canopy for the pieces that will come together and make sense of what her body is doing. This is why, occasionally, you can see her silhouetted against the night sky, in branches that seem hard-pressed to hold her weight, the violence of the swaying there matched only by the melodious quality of her singing. How to explain it to the authorities? Make it clear we are not laboring under the least delusion, but simply telling the truth? And, more than likely, predicting the future. Because if this can happen on Tuesday, then what's to stop it from spreading? What's to stop the phenomenon from crossing the globe like a virus, appropriating our vicious dreams the way you might pocket the candy from a display case at the grocery store? Or wipe your feet on the carpet, knowing full well that they are not clean. We wish such things would remain a mystery, catastrophes so uncommon they have no name. They aren't

even recognized by the clergy. But our hopes and wishes in this direction must remain, of course, forever unfulfilled. Inasmuch as they serve no purpose outside our heads. Notice the fresh-faced delinquents are apt to be smoking cigarettes on the sidelines. Where they tell one another stories with no basis in fact. Like those you memorized in school after you'd been told to clean the filters in the basement, in the furnace, but you didn't know where the basement was. There are parts lifted directly from Tacitus, especially those concerning Germanicus, the triumphs that made his stepfather jealous. Or was it his cousin? No matter, the directories all point the same way. Toward madness and eventual collapse. Just the sort of thing you consider yourself immune to, if only because those around you speak of it in the past tense. They follow the line of reasoning to its conclusion, then sit around looking perplexed as though they anticipate something further. An appendix maybe. Or a flock of crows to settle on the branches and agree to be a sign. Of what, no one is certain, though you suspect the crows themselves might be able to tell us if we were to learn their language -- which should only take a little time, a little patience. After all, we recently mastered Basque. You don't like the results close up, but at a safe enough distance, the show proves exhilarating, if a

little predictable once the initial patterns reveal themselves. It all settles into repetition the way we settle into divans. Or bad habits. We are visibly shaken by the sight of herons, say, hovering at the edge of the lake. Common sense might suggest here a parting of the ways, at least for a month or two, just to see what will happen. Though if you were to follow this logic to its furthest possible conclusion, you'd find there a brick wall that doesn't seem to serve any purpose. There are no gardens behind it. No stone path. Or rosebushes. Just people huddled together at the edge of the cliff. And cackling in such a bone-chilling way, you think for a moment the woman standing beside you might faint. It's almost as if the brainstorming is meant to get the audience in out of the rain at the same time it is declaring the rain only a brief hallucination. The kind of thing that haunts lunatics, say, when they are asked to ride the bus just like the rest of us. Or change the tires. This is why I've long since renounced whatever political affiliations I may have picked up as a child. After all, children are expected to know, simply by testing the air, who is their ally and who is liable to snatch them up in a sack for no reason. They glance once at their subject and then file his image away again as you might a tax return. Or the leaves of a sycamore tree. Assuming, of course, you have grown hopelessly enamored

of edges. She tells your fortune by looking closely at your ears, touching them in such a way that the future opens up like a tent when it has not been properly secured. Or when there is a stiff breeze and the people in the upper deck of the stadium think the world is coming to an end. Because of the noise below. Because they have not treated strangers kindly. That she might be fumbling for your wallet troubles you, at first, the way we are troubled by the odd twinge or shooting pain in the abdomen. By the slow delivery of rare coins. The collectors will have done their homework, of course, but they don't seem to recognize when it is you're bluffing. And so they take extraordinary care to note facial tics. The alteration of color, even if only by a few degrees. We can only hope for a good result when the whim of others is involved. If it shows up like a flock of cranes barking that way they have of announcing themselves so as to wake up the entire neighborhood, then we are ahead of the game. By a score of twenty-eight, say, to whatever number best represents the universe. Granted, there are still territories we are not too keen to visit. They sound like places we've explored before. Nantucket. Errant backwaters. Places where the hostages are so upset at gaining their freedom, they have been known to throw themselves under trains (but only those, of course, that

haven't started to move yet). They have been known to burn down vast fields without first inquiring what is growing there, just as if they had knowledge ahead of time from some occult source. Prophetic tables thrown together by the Yanomami, say, just when things were really beginning to look bleak. When the law went into effect that said they had to give up their blow guns, their hallucinogenic beverages. And replace them with stocking caps and Harley Davidsons. Whole oceans of mint tea. All joking aside, the marsupials are not much appreciated now that we know where they came from. Why they parade about in lowly costumes. We will not be fooled by the impertinence that poses as your ordinary dollar bill. Its edges torn to assure those who might spend it that they are making the right decision. That the moon is not without its merits, granted, but then when have you heard anyone deny this while seated in a gondola, musical notes falling from its pilot like pears? There are better ways of handling our misery. We can have a baby, for instance, and trust that the mechanism kicks in. We can trust that we won't simply turn our backs on it and scamper off, hoping for better luck on the other side of the meadow. Or among the vacation homes. Or maybe we have lost all hope of knowing why we do what we do, and we grow content with the radio because at least

it can be trusted to deliver on occasion something of absolute value. Something you can compare favorably to the rest of the world because it doesn't really exist. Oh! it might sit on the earlobe for a moment, but no one can catch it there. And even if you were to feel it moving, feel it crawling about on the flesh like a dragonfly, there is no telling if that sensation is part of the object itself or simply another symptom of your own degeneration. That process whereby you have become inextricably linked with the markers at the side of the highway. The billboards and the hand-painted signs warning of what it will be like when the end of the world arrives. Even if it is a little off-schedule. Toss the phonebook out and you'll begin to wonder how you're going to get hold of those who specialize in block glass. In the kind of law that used to be ontology. Or physics. But got lost along the way, turned around the way your typical Malay visitor might when she hikes the two days back from the national forest. Without so much as a poncho. She has a fear of those idioms we've grown accustomed to because we do not think them vicious. And she'd like to know where you got that debonair manner, that smirk that seems more like an admission of something sinister, obscene, than anything that might have been passed down freely from your father. Of course, we'll have



to borrow the objects of our ire from other states, as we've run through every witch native to this region. Typical problem for those who wish to put on a show involving the less than fertile! Or the uncooperative. Like indigo snakes and beetles. We must enlist the assistance of people with graduate degrees. And a moral objection to the very notion of entertainment. Of cross-word puzzles. All the same, they can't resist climbing aboard because they're curious. They've heard rumors and read reports. Not just in the journals, but in the locker room, where you may record the enormities of your inner life. The phantasms and the stock epithets. The cartoon villains brushed in pastel and stinking of olives. But you'll never make them as ugly as a man's face when he looks in the mirror after committing no sin whatsoever. After living the type of life that avoids blemish so thoroughly, even the film critics are amazed. Her yellows begin to seem like criticism. Attempts at defining the world as something lean. Despite the abundance of catfish, silk. Or because of them, one wag says to the other. From the balcony. Or the horse-drawn sledge where they watch developments with all the barely discernible concern of emirs. The woman mixes paint with a stick she found in the back yard, illustrates her notebooks. And grumbles out loud about our being groomed for damp earth by a providence

forever defined by its work. How they commiserate over the counter! These men dressed in satin, these entrepreneurs and assassins. They have been done wrong by someone who has the house key, who brandishes it like a fishing pole when the barometer drops and everyone knows better than to step outside. With nothing but a hat for protection. And a pair of sandals. Those items purchased at half-price at the very moment when they were becoming obsolete. Or at least when no one recognized them any longer. Nor how their use might once have benefited our friends and neighbors. Those who routinely gather around the piano in celebration. Who pry the shells off turtles to have at the bones inside. Perfect for die! For an afternoon throwing numbers against the wall and wondering what your wife is up to, why she seems distant all of a sudden. There is something uncanny in the spread of jigsaw puzzles, in the fictions that no longer rely on words, but choose instead to marinate themselves in the fluid of numbers. Of everyday objects pictured without caption. Without the usual explanations that wind up sounding like an old woman talking to herself in a brand new room, the dust motes riding in at the windows like Valkyrie. And the sound of breaking glass getting closer and closer, until she's sure someone's in the courtyard with a baseball bat and a gleam

in his eye like the habitual onanist. Or the guy downtown who patches tires. Perhaps awkwardness and alienation are not the primary characteristics of the human condition. But we must act as if they are. Because if we don't, the world will expect the kind of competence from us at every turn that would simply become exhausting. Ruskin suggests the little green crabs playing about in the moorings are just as noteworthy as any Titian to be found in a museum. And maybe we are all like that. Maybe we are running from one place to another because we are bored and frightened and we've come to believe that only meaningless activity, so long as it is activity – a movement, an endless twitching of the limbs – will set us to rights again. Our deepest insecurities, though, are nothing compared to our most cherished illusions. Those thoughts about the self that inure the self to danger. That get it puffed up like a fish. Or violating the laws of physics as a matter of course. When the brides are leaping off the levee en masse. And the crossword puzzles suddenly seem trivial to those who've been working them every morning for forty years. Who used to say prepositions are more important than any saint or thinker you care to name. You begin to think this is how you should spend your every day as well. Casting about for some powerful entity, some nearly god-like abstraction you

can skewer with a salad fork. And those puns you learned the first day back from spring training. But, of course, nothing begets nothing, unless love is involved. In which case, you can bet the little voice in your head that tells you the globe is lubricated with pain is going to develop an accent all of a sudden. And everyone is shouting from the other side of the river. You can't make out what they're saying exactly. Something about the sentence as the basic building block of civilization. And why we should, then, avoid composing in it lest we all become weak as fawns. I suspect the centipedes marvel at this wit of ours, at this ability to categorize them according to attribute, as if we knew all along what the most important thing was, and we ignored that which was not central. It's the same ability that marks the accountants out as superior beings among those who can't get through the day without the concept of superior beings. Who are liable to faint dead away before lunch time, and pull their own fingernails out by eight, should you tell them the Constitution guarantees equality before the law. And genetics insures a comparable outcome in the flesh. We will have to drop wells in the soil, build teepees and make love in them when there is absolutely nothing else available. All of it might have gone the way of the Carmelite order, in fact. Or those summer storms that

used to chase us out of the rafters. Used to hurl epithets at us from on high. To feel safe, then, once this difference has been established – once you have written your love poems and posted them in the mail – is to invite yet further misunderstanding. To try to fend off the primary element, fear, for instance, with little more than a toothbrush. And those prayers you picked up in the Y Beibl Cyssegr-lan. You are a reasonable human being who, while plagued occasionally by hallucination, is not about to give into it any more than you are liable to believe the calculus you worked on so diligently in high school is now altogether absent from your memory. Still, you couldn't bring it to bear on a disordered world, or a pad of paper, even if you tried. The animals in their cages object to this in the strongest possible terms, of course, claiming in their own varied and ineffective ways that we ought not to subject them to an evening at the drive-in. Where there is probably only pornography playing anyway. And decidedly human pornography at that. So how are they supposed to enjoy themselves? How play along with the illusion of their own freedom when the things they'd choose have yet to be invented. Or if they have been invented, there is no knowing about them when you spend your life shut away in a closet with an i.d. bracelet around your wrists (or your

flippers) and the caretakers forever waking you up in the middle of the night. Just to make sure you are breathing. What kind of spectacle is that? And where do the termagants get off prancing about and scolding us from the other side of the lot? Where the snow covers up the crates we used to hide our weapons in, our soda bottles and the books full of sonnets we could not understand. And so we rarely tried. He determines he has had enough of misery, of growing up in Des Moines. So he joins the Navy. But not before losing his virginity to a woman considerably older than he is. One who may or may not have ties to the occult underground. That he does not recognize his predicament as arising from the very comic books aimed at his demographic is disappointing, to say the least. But maybe we ought to reserve judgment. After all, if you were to find yourself pining away after a woman named Laura, all the while wandering the steppes with a rogue remnant of the White Army, you wouldn't be able to make the connection either. Especially now that you loathe the cold. You vacation instead for two years in a row on the Yucatan, where they say the civilization that molders close by is so ancient, it has no thoroughfares. Only hitching posts for donkeys. Windows that look out on the canopy. Letters carved into stone walls. The exact message has yet to be de-

ciphered. Though there are those who will tell you it is the handiwork of a twelve-year old boy. And if we imagine then we are more exacting, more illuminated -- that we would never, for instance, fall for such visions as promise a better world just beyond the edges of our own -- who will set it down in writing? Who will match our optimism with the sort of dignified pamphleteering necessary to convince others what they believe is not to be trusted? Any more than you can trust the shadow box to reveal itself completely. To satisfy your longing for images that mean something more than what is presented on the surface. And yet, somehow, to refuse all such meaning at the same time. It's as if we expect the garden to tend itself. Every day but Thursday. Because Thursday is heavy, tedious. It has no real purpose, beyond that of linking the beginning with the end. Recalling the proper function of a thing precisely when the proper function is most likely to alleviate our pain is easier said than done. The mind works the way a comet does, meaning it comes and goes at its own deliberate pace. And if you wish to predict such movements, you have to spend a lifetime studying the phenomenon. You must bathe in numbers so prolific and disturbing, who can blame even the experts for throwing up their hands now and then when the predictions and the subsequent events seem as far apart as

the shoulder blades of a hippopotamus? Or the centuries separating the advent of a particular faith and its decline. Caused not by lack of credibility, but a shift in the language. Like that you see in Coptic, say, which serves just fine for services, but will not allow its own spread through the everyday activities of the people. This means, I suppose, the coats are not hung up properly. Or there's a smell in the closet like okra, an odor that hadn't been there before and so seems suspicious, if only because the contract called for something fairly familiar. For the sand to come out of the west and bite into your flesh and clog up the gutters all at the same time. And you don't know which problem to take care of first. We are often beset by difficulties of this kind, patterns impressing themselves into the taut skin of our lives. And the fairy tales joining forces so as to wake us up at four o'clock in the morning. Just when we were dreaming about adult pleasures a thousand times more fulfilling than those offered by Rapunzel and her ilk. People like that always seem anxious to get back to the way things used to be. Just as if they are afraid of the future for no good reason, other than that it hasn't happened yet. That it looks a lot like the sort of place that has no center and makes do with egg rolls and algebra. And those big American novels telling their tales in monotone all through the night. We hurl them



from the top of one building or another. So long as the building is abandoned. And the books not as thick as that first one we got from the woman who taught classics at the community college. Who said Orpheus was even then watching from some vantage point that would never be revealed. And so was forever fortified against the onslaughts of troubled souls who, in their enthusiasm, might otherwise be expected to unseat him. The central tenet throws a pack over its shoulders then and heads south. Looking for a land where it will be taken seriously. Where the plumbing is up to code and the jukeboxes are all named after a sea bird. Where men the size of wallabies make their intentions known through witchcraft and sign language. Not necessarily in that order. The first faint trace of a smile that gathers behind her eyes is not meant entirely for you. It is to be shared among thirty or forty different men, most of whom she hasn't even met yet. And what will you do with your part of the proceeds, your percentage? Wallow in it like mud? Throw it back into the fever trees and swear your oaths? You haven't time for any of that. The air races are already underway. You can hear the jet engines echoing off the river, can see the shadows sweeping the sparsely inhabited hillsides. The tricky part is the end, the same that draws us forward like the vortex in the middle of

the whirlpool. Or the sign at the side of the road, one that promises something to do with the flesh. And billiards. It stands halfway between your destination and your point of origin, so that it may lure you away from the proper goal. Or at least get your mind in that position referred to as optimal by anyone who has gone through sixteen years of schooling. Who wins first prize in a research contest sponsored by the Society for Benevolent Participation and Unwinding the Fiber. Otherwise known as a club for elder statesmen. And their nieces, who tend to be nubile, and kind of tall. And not the least little bit inhibited when it comes to expressing their opinion about the Azores. The blankets we put down to keep the fleas off our legs are turning all sorts of colors. This is when you get the feeling that no one is listening. That you are doing your work faithfully (whatever it is) in a cave where even the sightless invertebrates have disappeared for some reason. And the sound is like rushing water. If you were to hear it beneath the surface, I imagine. Though to tell the truth, I rarely go swimming anymore now that I've aged considerably and my beard is as long as a mandolin. Even the deepest parts of the world are not so deep as one might imagine them to be. Search every envelope in your possession, for instance, every stub from the race track, and you'll realize something

it takes others entire lifetimes to figure out. The various properties of light so well catalogued by the men of genius who came before you slip back into your coat pocket, then, like a dollar's change. And who will keep this news from finding its way to Tibet? From announcing to all the world that you are an enemy of the people? You operate with simple, syrupy snack foods. You stuff brochures with names and titles to books that no one will ever read. Varro, in his treatise on agriculture, suggests the earth can be made to absorb the pain in one's feet, so long as you recite a certain incantation nine times, touch the earth, and spit. But you must be sober for reasons not readily accessible to the modern. We send one another hateful emails, the kind that accuse people of doing what we ourselves have done. Or wish so furtively we had done, we can no longer tell the difference. It's the same with toothpicks. Everyone has his eye on the quick remedy, the loosening of one thing from another without having to engage in a rigorous demolition or the preventive measures that keep one from getting leeches in the Pantanal. You may observe the same principle in the car wash, on the grounds of the asylum, in the hallways of the international banks when it's lunchtime and everyone has mayonnaise on his chin. The raccoon pelts are drying out on the porch just when the children

show the first unmistakable signs of rickets. Which ought to tell us what we need to know concerning their priorities. The likelihood of their getting into the choicest schools. Instead, they hurtle through life, swatting at walls and knocking over bassinets and cuckoo clocks and just generally doing the first thing that comes to mind. Perhaps our rugs remember when they too were something else. Something with a spine. And legs. And a will that would not take a back seat to anybody. One that regularly woke up in the morning already prepared to undo the damage of the day before. And so we lengthen our lives through some unknown property of the avocado. Something that has yet to be properly studied. Because we're afraid of what it will teach us, of what it might bring to the orchestra pit. Where it is, to say the least, sorely needed. The telephone rings and someone is on the other end who isn't quite sure what he is after. Who hems and haws like your typical traveling salesman come face to face with a hermaphrodite. All of which suggests we have been living too long with the remnants of the jungle in our blood and we need a respite, a day or two at the lake where all the modern amenities are to be found. Like shoe polish and those ribbons harpies play with when they are children. Imagine, however, if the abominations had come to us as something clean. Had

slipped the disguise over their shoulders and mingled in with the wait staff. Offering hors d'oeuvres and settling scores in the kitchen when no one was looking. When no one suspected a thing. We might have learned something then, might have offered up our guilt and recriminations as proof positive that someone knew what he was talking about. Even if we weren't sure who that might have been. Or why it was important that the fields shouldn't just wither up without anyone knowing we were there to explore them. Our friends have since drifted into closed communities of the sort that remind one of book clubs. Or the executive board rooms of one company or another. Places predicated on deformity of the soul. On finding out whether we have built the bile up sufficiently behind our eyes. Or have merely been faking it our whole lives, like owls. She paces that way because Sumerian is no longer offered junior year. Because the ambulance arrives with a fanfare usually associated with gardeners. And their uncompromising minds. Those who look upon the delta as a mosaic to be shared with the less fortunate and the arrogant alike. Like silver dollars. Or the tales that start with someone bleeding and then devolve into a simple listing of things we should be grateful for. Raisins. Those aircraft that hover over rice paddies. The archangels. Invented, as near

as I can tell, to sell magazines. She disagrees with Schopenhauer inasmuch as he assumes most men are deluded. But admires the fact that he played the flute an hour a day. For the same reason, apparently, she gets on horses. And follows the trails that lead to Wisconsin, if you are patient. If you have packed a lunch of sliced ham and crackers, and know the difference between north and those photographs of blizzards that wind up in the newspaper on occasion. And make us want to prepare our wills. We have more important things to do, of course, than contemplate our demise. And yet, we can't seem to resist. We mull it over with the intensity of a man who thinks about his wife while he is away on business. Or, as is more often the case, her sister. That giddiness comes of forgetting to eat, of snatching at the specific edges of one's life with fingernails so badly trimmed they leave a mark like four half moons. Or two thirds of a sandwich. We stole what we could from a truck that came to the work site on occasion, peddling its wares with signs hung from the side and painted by someone who had no sense of what is truly appealing. And what is just a kind of showing off -- the sort of thing that sends one out into the snow, pursuing hares. Perhaps you've been told they favor cold weather and you want strangers to know you aren't soft in the spine. The way

some people get when they've been too long out of college. They think back to those days with such regularity, forty years stumble by in a matter of minutes. And the woman you once loved returns because what else is she going to do? Go on without you as if you never existed? As if you had become just another character in a masque she saw performed once on the sidewalk? By people who didn't even use the proper term. They called it something contemporary, a misunderstanding. The kind that gets people sent to prison if they aren't careful. Or if they are, and the mayor shows up anyway, waving his broadsword around at intermission. The people here then weren't so much ancestors as pioneers in the mundane. Travelers itching to write their memoirs because who doesn't enjoy a sentimental take on the Tropic of Capricorn? This is not the first time we have faced insurrection from minor characters. You'll recall that episode involving pill bugs and the microbes they carry about with them in the leaf litter like patches on their sweaters. All of which suggests we are better off without a reputation. Without the flouting of conventions that became conventions because they are irrational. Because people wanted to keep an eye on them and nothing more. What difference does it make if we handle eyelash vipers like dollar bills when much of the rest

of our acquaintance already have them locked away in cages in the basement? They toss them scraps from the dinner table. They sing them songs on occasion like “Goodnight Irene” or “Hey Nonny Nonny”. I mean, look how long it’s taken just to get Auntie and Grandma speaking to one another again after that argument involving the Eucharist, its unintended consequences. She feels confident whatever she has learned will impress those around her, make them think she is wiser than she actually is. That the bayonets one purchases at gun shows or antique malls are black for a reason, and that reason applies to us in some vague manner. It connects us with those we loved in a previous life the way sound connects everything that hears it to everything the waves pass over or through. Traces remain after the event, of course. Tell-tale signs composed of heavy elements mostly. Copper. The movie posters sporting creatures from beyond the deep, from the center of the Earth, with their strangely hypnotic gazes. But this just means the ledger has margins, that there is room to flesh out whatever scheme has been occupying her mind, so long as the functionaries from the other side remain in the dark. Or the near dark – that half light she remembers from the mouth of a cave. Our bodies react to the world around them in hysterical fashion. Because how would you



feel if there were walls where before there had been nothing at all? How would you handle the introduction of thorns and locusts? But for the flickering light and the sound of machinery humming close by, we might have thought the world itself a phantasm. Like those that used to haunt the troubadours. Like those that used to wake them up in the middle of the night and start them composing for a beloved who hadn't actually appeared in the dream. We might forge ahead at that point, knowing additional items discovered will be of tangential value. Improvisational notes and addenda created by the mind's natural tendency to continue in whichever direction suddenly becomes open to it. Regardless of the body. By its desire to move forward if for no other reason than to stop and rest means almost certain death. Still, this too is what one longs for – a leisurely hour when one can sit down and pluck the fowl. Take water to the men working in the street. Men who have been there since last Tuesday. Digging up pavement. Cutting down trees. Because something, apparently, has happened. Something catastrophic, like a water main break. Or that moment when a star sheds its old exterior. And explodes. It becomes a force to be reckoned with then. Or at least catalogued. Filed away with a grainy photograph paper-clipped to the folder. And an asterisk by its name.

Almost immediately, men named Reginald show up in alarming numbers. They stand around the swing set, appraising it silently, running gnarled thumbs over the joints and the rusty chains. You begin to suspect these chains and the vicious animals rendered harmless by throwing ponchos over their heads are really just illustrations in a book. And the book is not at all clear concerning what exactly it is going to illustrate. And what it is going to leave to the imagination of the reader. Like the lawn. Or the foundry just beyond the fence where, if they're smelting anything, you can detect it on the breeze the way you notice people at the edges of photographs if you look closely enough. Aunts or bystanders whose names begin, maybe, with the same letter yours does. Or who remind you, if their heads are turned just right, of the fish you bought at the market. Of course, even your lipids, they say, are out to get you. But all such theories suffer from the examination one gives them in what is called our spare time by those who have no more of it than the polar bear once he wakes up from hibernation. This would suggest our prejudices match our temperaments, the way our scarves highlight our eyes. The connoisseur has no balance from that point forward. He thinks of nothing but the collecting and illustrating of myths no one has ever heard of before.

So that you begin to wonder if he has been in the field, scouring libraries and private collections the rest of us have no access to. Or whether maybe he has just been making this stuff up by the cartload. Sneaking off to the basement at night when the wife and kids are settled in bed, and having nightmares of their own. Everyone has an unpleasant morning once in a while. But to run up against one every day for a month, and then to have to swallow the bits of avocado left over in your teeth from supper the night before! This is to run the risk of madness without ever really knowing what the term means. Of course, we hear it thrown about as casually as a softball by people who iron their clothing with hot rocks. Who bark at their lovers like a bunch of seals. But they don't mean what they say. Or they don't write it down beforehand the way you were taught to in grade school. So that you can check to see if what you plan on saying out loud is the same as what you cooked up in your head when you were busy trying to keep others from reading your mind. After all, why should they stick around when the whole world is moving? When everyone in it has an address that, if you were to examine it closely, would turn out to be false. Or at least misleading – suggesting a permanence that just isn't allowed. And yet, we make up cards with our names and places of residence

splashed across the front of them like fish paste. And we hand them to complete strangers. We say, look, there was plenty to keep us entertained in those days when there were no projectors or haughty sculptures of any kind. Just some paper. And the fact of the human body. Its shape like the modest ginger root. Its taste like those turnip greens stewed all day in fatback and vinegar. A sudden, unwarranted scent of kiwi suggests it's only a matter of time before the boils arrive like armies. Or you find a note on the refrigerator that tells of champagne and moonlit nights spent with someone else, while you were at home folding laundry. If only we knew, though, why the one becomes the other so readily. Why, in effect, it thumbs its nose at our every attempt to make it stay on the south side of the demarcation, like a family of musicians whose success is hampered by the political implications of the tunes in its repertoire. The battle hymn of this, the scherzo in honor of that. But none of this will keep the Ferris wheel off our minds for long. None of it stands up to the scrutiny of other people, other souls, the existence of which we are assured of by no fewer than twenty-five thinkers of the highest caliber. And so we salve up our knees and elbows and step outside to enjoy the weather. Which reminds us of Aristipuss' complaint that people test their earthenware

before purchase to see if it rings true, but have no comparable standard for testing life. Such grousing was, of course, expected of the ancients. But now we expect something altogether different of our wise men. We expect them, for instance, to introduce us to whomever they happen to be walking with. And if there is a restaurant close by, we expect them to cross the street so as to avoid it. Still, there is no besting the use of one's teeth. They are, in fact, the perfect tool and emblem. And he who finds himself without their services is going to rue the day he ever heard of solid bodies. The Earth's tendency to pass through zones of light without altering its trajectory. Where blenders turn into blood, into rare coins, through a process not fully understood even by the experts. Those who wind up panhandling by the river. When everyone else is out celebrating a niece's wedding. Or the end of that misery that comes of having toenail fungus. Of trying to convince the whole world you are far more interesting than you actually are. Hence the beard. The novel in manuscript that occupies the top drawer of your dresser. No one knows of its existence. Not even your grandmother, who would like to be kept abreast of everything, and yet, who turns her nose up at your endeavors just as soon as she gets a whiff of them. Or as soon as the hockey team announces its

schedule. And the levers stick in a position to make the opera house vibrate with light. Doesn't it just figure? Doesn't it play out in such a way that the janitor himself can do nothing about it? With his box of lye. And his son with the cleft pallet. With a hankering to be an umpire when he grows up, because then, at least, everyone will know where he stands. The dream of decapitation is one of boundless optimism, despite all appearances to the contrary. Because it indicates a starting over. A refreshing of the concept of self through an actual, physical change of the most radical sort. Like that the interpreters make when they forget the golden rule of their enterprise. Namely – not to tread on the speaker's tongue. For fear you will raise there welts and other anomalies that might incite a response from those who would otherwise remain on the sidelines. The sound they make is comparable to that, I imagine, you'd hear on the wards of one penitentiary or another. Especially if it specializes in the criminally insane. Those who have no chance of escape because they don't entirely realize they have been locked up in the first place. Perhaps this causes our impatience with that bacon that comes in boxes with a window in the front. So that you can see what you are buying before you ever buy it. Just as if the general public has had some difficulty imagining what is on the inside of

even something as simple as that. And so they insist on transparency right through to midnight. And the following day. When everyone will wonder what the world has in store for him. Whether the Cardinals will sweep the playoffs. Or if the affair will be any good. If maybe he might be risking more than just a paycheck by bedding a woman with what appears to be two separate sets of teeth, placed one outside the other in a mouth that is, for all that, strangely alluring. Expecting ten minutes or more without distraction, however, and expecting it the same way one expects to be happy even as the walls are crumbling and the lime trees are all but barren, promises to be a frustrating experience. Unless, of course, you open the letters with an instrument designed for opening letters. Rather than using your thumb. Still, when it becomes clear that there is neither relief nor satisfaction, neither awareness of the taint or discussion of its merits, then the only other option seems to be suicide. We would have been better served, I suppose, by an article of clothing. A cigarette holder or a blank stare stolen from the far end of the continent and smuggled across borders that were, even then, in the process of re-working themselves through the industry, not of the men with compasses and quills, but the earth itself, roiling with sulfur a quarter mile down. We've seen the still

photographs. And were made privy to detailed notes and correspondence, all of it being more than adequate to suggest the dwarves are no longer out of the picture. They have returned the way tuberculosis is said to have returned. Only they did so under the cover of night, when the guards were in their corner, throwing dice. The disorder comes with its own connotations. Like a phrase borrowed from Latin. But its cure remains on the very edges of our understanding. Because it is something with no color. No shape or viscosity. But now, the magnolia leaves are piling up outside the window. And there is no one there to put them in bags and cart them off like soldiers. Perhaps because someone wants us to view this sort of thing as if it were brand new. As if it had never occurred in this hemisphere before. But it has been in the planning stage for centuries. In fact, it seems to have been the main item of contention among the Sumerian deities when we were busy locking them up in ziggurats and making them say half of all they wished to say in brackets. It's the same principle one adopts in one's daily life among prostitutes. Or bankers. Those who make loans of staggering proportions. They are simply padding the calendar. Waiting for something to take shape that might itself become momentous when others look back on it. When they are writing their memoirs and



can't help but throw in some hyperbole, the way you might be tempted to toss some scallions into your mincemeat pie. Who hasn't tried to kiss someone in a snowstorm when there were other people standing in line? Where did such lines come from? And what makes you think they will ultimately go away? They won't, of course, and this is testimony not to our own weakness. But to the tenacity of the human will. Other humans and other wills, to be sure. But we may take solace in the fact that ours was created originally in the same mould. See if, within a week or two, you are making judgments you had once feared impossible. Difficult things – like choosing laundry detergent. Or reprimanding your underlings. Things that had previously been items of such costly psychological harm, you pushed them to the front of the blast furnace and forgot about them, until they started to sing. If you are not careful, though, you will wind up like those middle managers who commit suicide, not from despair. But because they have no more time left to read Gogol. To go ice skating with their sisters who get together every Saturday to do figure-eight's. And discuss why they no longer feel burdened by their childhoods. Why the notion of childhood itself ought to be revised to take into account the fact that it doesn't exist. We are all vulnerable to that reversal that sends waterfowl,

shocked at the fury of it, into the sky. That attaches an extra digit to the hands of the unfortunate just when we've come to think of the unfortunate as a category that needs serious revision. Perhaps the question itself is one of those empty gestures we feel obliged to make because everyone else is making them with such frequency, they begin to seem like instincts. Like second and third nature. But the alternative is just as frivolous. A bookshelf full of treatises. On the history of Dominique (Bianocelli), say, celebrated protégé of Tristano Martinelli, and, of course, the foremost harlequin of the seventeenth century. Such bathos is a trick, really, an attempt to get us to be more compliant. Less fertile and highly-strung. Like those anemones that gave up their barbs a million years ago, in trade for something less obvious. This might include the pocket watch, and it might simply relegate everything to the pocket, where we can keep an eye on it with greater ease and efficiency than if it had been extended over vast amounts of space. And, I suppose, time. Though the second is really just a fancy way of saying the first. This doesn't mean, however, that your math teacher is doomed to re-live her life over and over again exactly how she lived it through the first time – each lover appearing at her elbow. And wearing those same striped trousers. Or smiling that same untrammelled smile.

Even drooling a bit in what can only be described as anticipation. Barter away your birthright. No one will know the difference. They will say you learned the hard way what the rest of us learned the really hard way, something that might intrigue a seamstress for the simple reason that she has yet to bury certain episodes from her past. She looks out the corner of her eye, expecting at any moment to see a fish-man standing at the foot of her bed, its hands waving above its head like oak branches, its guttural objections echoing about the room and settling finally into a pool of sound barely containable in a blanket. And if this means we won't invite our closest friends to the opening, then the damage is more systemic than we realized. It takes every opportunity to present itself as something more significant than damage. Like a softball field. Or an army of the sort that used to appear on the horizon and make everyone run to shut their gates. To get the laundry off the lines and the potatoes on the table before the inevitable arrived to the sound of trumpets. And then, what interrupts your morning perambulation but the smell of wildflowers and French toast? The hammer that hangs awkwardly from its hook, just as if those who put it there aren't sure why they got the invitation in the first place. They imagine pleading on the part of their allies, a crack of thunder from the far side of

the sky. And then, that silence that stills the windowpane, that puts one in mind of Tangiers. Too bad about the ponies, their cost to insure, their belligerence when faced with new things. And always that sense we have hearts for no reason, beating as if they didn't know what else to do. The body allows the mind to gather itself around something like terror. But there is really only a minor misunderstanding. A booking things too early. Or expecting donations from those who want merely to be left alone. In their attic rooms decked out with enormous photographs of the starlets of the mid-twentieth century -- the leggy red-heads that never seemed to mind the gray tint that shadowed their every move on screen. That drew the nutrients from their bodies like a child sucking at a straw. Consequently, there was nothing left of them when those of my generation had grown up and we wondered aloud how one keeps from suffering the same fate. How one avoids rolling around on the sidelines like a walrus. But not the sneaky kind that wants nothing so much as the opportunity to plant a tusk in your skull. Rather, the sort that keeps showing up in children's books, with a top hat on and the habit of saying the cleverest things without really meaning to. Return implies birth, a beginning, a reason for that which had not, until recently, been in evidence. This requirement leads one

to conjure plot as a means of fulfilling itself, but never lasts longer than the impulse. The celery wilts in your hand and the people in the crowd are all headed in the same direction. Down the stairs and to the right. Though if we crane our necks a certain way and blink once or twice (all the while being careful to make it seem as if it is the glare of the sun that produces such spasms, such strange machinations of the muscles in one's face), it seems as if there is no line at all. Not even one of those free-for-all's characterized by flying elbows. Or men with extravagant beards laughing at jokes that no one else seems even to have heard. Let alone comprehended. If I had found myself alone this much when I was younger, I might have been tempted to do something about it. I might have decided to walk into town and start an argument with the first attractive woman I saw. Or if not the first, then certainly the second or third. And things would have turned out alright so long as I understood this was the wrong way to go about it. So long as I understood that their reactions were bound to be hostile. There is nothing you could have done to save me, but that's not the point. We must find a way around these obstacles -- self-imposed or no -- much as Solomon did when he ordered the use of the Shamir worm. To split the temple stone over which it crawled (the use of iron was,

of course, forbidden). There was just the little matter, then, of wrangling. Of working in the sun. Since May, we've turned the outhouses into decorative set pieces for the garden path. And those who speculate aloud where they may have seen such things previously are really only asking to be shown the door. They wrap bibs around their necks and tear into the shellfish with their fingers. And they have a hard time admitting caves are still a draw for them. Those places where people used to hang their skins up to dry. And told stories around a fire that didn't burn so much as speak to them. In a baritone, I suppose. Or one of those Appalachian lilts that seems to move and stand still all at the same time. The sound of metal vibrating close by reminds me of the lullabies my mother used to sing. But only when there was company coming and she wanted to be rid of me once and for all. On some nights she wound up the spring in the toy robot and set the thing maneuvering between cypress trees in the swamp. Its pitch and roll were corrected over every tree root and every natural rise in the topography as if miraculously. As if by the hand of something that, if you were to see it wearing gloves, would cause you such abject misery, no one could make it right again. Not even the man who stands on the corner and winks. She knew predictions resemble the things they

predict. They adopt characteristics as if they had had none of their own previously. In themselves, they are spare as white walls. And so, we must listen for the footsteps at night even when there is no one walking. The echo is a way of enticing annihilation, I suppose. Of making room for it in a consciousness otherwise so busy, the world itself fails to make any headway. It lingers at the edges as if it expects someone to offer it a cigarette. To wave to it from the mezzanine like an acquaintance one hasn't spoken to in years. You may wish to send the engineer packing through the mountains on a mule, lest he discover your secrets. Those things that keep you awake for as many as twenty-three consecutive nights. Though the sleep descends again routinely in the morning. Just when you've had your coffee and you are considering whether to risk a trip to the airport without taking an umbrella. The ladies will want to know who you are supposed to meet there, and the gentlemen won't much care. Nor, for that matter, if we're being honest, will the ladies, who we have inadvertently smeared by implying motives of a certain kind -- motives they almost certainly do not possess. Though possession would not necessarily indicate something unusual. Would not suggest, for instance, that they are more lascivious or hard-hearted than any other group of people you might care to name.

Even those who happen to share their same basic body type and facial configuration, no matter how enormous the oceans might be that separate them. In fact, all such categories are reminders of the clothing certain people preferred in our youth. Especially those who had an almost unlimited budget. But chose to act as if their resources were something to be embarrassed about. Perhaps because those resources had their origins in an activity universally referred to as blackmail. But still little understood for all that. It is not something a person does with a pang in the heart. Anymore than it is proscribed for those who have lost all hope before the world and its filthy, unmentionable habits. Who forever wish they had been born in some century before their own. Just as if the misery that comes of being human can be eliminated through careful contemplation of the calendar. Or the bel canto operas of Rossini. We know the color of the culprit's jacket. And where he purchased it and with what denomination. Though to admit as much is considered a sort of bragging. A way of changing the subject without really having a subject in the first place, much the way Pasicles, brother of Crates, was in the habit of greeting even the greatest noblemen by touching their testicles and answering any objection with the claim that one part of the body is as good



as the next. I don't know which is likely to be the first thing that strikes you – the size of the stranger's teeth or the look in his eye when he is approaching with a crowbar? And you have a flat tire, sure, but how he is supposed to know that? The mirrors are of little use. They are forever warning us of distortion. Of how they change outlines by messing with light, even if the intention is to capture it as faithfully as possible. You don't believe me? Try putting the utensils down your throat. There is some reflex, some inner working of the mind or body, that won't let you accomplish it. That will sit down beside the stream and sketch out its objections in triplicate, borrowing the flowery language of some Canadian poet or another. To better access, I suppose, that place inside us that recognizes when it has been defeated. When the bat still clings to the tree bark. And it looks like a thumb on flesh. It serves as a reminder of how someone used to lean over us, the moon balanced on her shoulder. They wait for Baruch. Assigning him places that previously went to other personalities. That served to explain why the earth is barren when it is barren. Why it offers little resistance to steel. The sound of chattering teeth becomes so insistent they have to pipe in saxophone jazz from the overhead speakers just to cover it up. To keep the sound from escaping into the ordinary world the way

experimental strains of soybeans do, on occasion. Or those locusts that dig their way up through the ground without knowing where they are going. Or what to expect once they get there. Even rabbits, being timid creatures, have a robust smell, and the tints and contours of it knife immediately through the others, so that the Man-fish, having never yet seen a rabbit, knows immediately what it is good for. And sloshes thither with all aplomb. In the meantime, every lease tells us less about its signatory than it does about Jupiter, say. Though that particular body has been known to keep its secrets too. To get at them, one must have a larger than average telescope. And a mind that isn't afraid to unhinge itself in the process of observation. It's best to let the city's transportation needs take care of themselves. Otherwise, we are forever checking schedules – hiring and firing people who can't help but keep a grudge. They show up, outside the hedges, after midnight, their eyes aglow with what looks like madness. Even when you're too far away to be sure it's their eyes you are seeing rather some other, less conspicuous part of the face. List the complications then, if you have to. Concentrate on bodily disruptions first. Boils. Sand between the toes. The calcification of joints you didn't even know you had. It all begins to sound like wisecracks tossed off with such

ferocious speed, a prize might be forthcoming. Even an appearance in the anthology. After which, there is that moment when we can be relied on to do the wrong thing. Mimic the pharmacist when he is mixing powders. Try on the goat costume in the middle of summer. And parade about the fields. As if we had no idea there are men out there with crossbows. And notepads. And maybe even an idea for a comic strip that, should it pan out, would revitalize that whole, overlooked world of spelunking. Would turn it back into what it had been before. Namely, a way to unlock the secrets of the human heart. And then, occasionally, to lock them back up again. On the sharper stones. There was something he was determined to accomplish once he had had enough of the clams. Had seen the stitching in his jacket and knew that the ballet would not go on without him. "A little to the left," she said, and he thought she meant his hands. But she stepped on his toes then and nearly fell in among the thrashing -- the barracuda, or whatever it was, churning the ocean like it was irked at the moisture itself. Ah, he thought, how wonderful to be at the height of one's powers at precisely the same moment when others are at the lowest ebb of theirs! It's like Goethe falling in love again at the age of seventy-five. With Ulrike von Levetzow, a girl of nineteen

and the object of his last masterpieces. Most notably the “Marienbad Elegy”. But how are we supposed to decipher such longing when we ourselves are in the middle of dinner? Of whistling a disfigured tune? We wouldn’t know how to continue otherwise, the world becoming something so stark and alien, we simply have to wish ourselves out of it the way children wish away the people that haunt their closets at night. And this is yet further incentive to demand, in all earnestness, that your past should be returned to you. As if it were little more than a toy truck. Or a castanet. The kind of thing you lay aside at some point, meaning to go back again later and pick up. Just as soon as you have finished doing whatever it was you were doing. Could be we are expecting the same treatment the Smilodon gets at the museum: an enclosed space with air conditioning. Detailed write-up on the wall involving not just our dimensions and probable prey items, but the very essence of who we were. Close psychological scrutiny of the sort that masks the real difficulties. The way the thumb was forever turning the wrong way. The way our minds were just decoration slopped on last and therefore of such questionable benefit, our minds themselves preferred the company of desert flowers. Of the rain that turns them every now and then into just one of the crowd. I know the cyclical theme has

been done to death by people anxious to assert at least that much truth, even if they have to do it over and over again. But I'm not afraid of the wet season. Or the integer. Any more than I'm looking forward to either one of them coming back again and winding up on the couch. But we have an obligation, I suppose, to those concepts that might otherwise have nowhere else to go. That might have to hitch a ride to China, say, on a packet-boat. Or the back of an albatross that, until recently, called a single white rock on a stack of white rocks its home. The secret correspondence is not so secret any more. Is not featherweight or intentionally heavy. Though there are those who accuse it of starting wars that haven't actually started yet. This is why the voice from the empty place beneath the sutures is plaintive. And growing enormous. There is nothing you can do to resist it. It must be placated, or you face a life of withering insult from your own body. A vocal reminder of your failure to act when the sky itself was willing to cooperate. There are some things that simply can not be divided beyond a certain stage. If we try to slice them up anyway (or break them open in collisions or pick them apart with our thumbs) we wind up with something that knows its own heart, knows the shape of its own countenance, even as it is trying on one disguise after

another before the guestroom mirror. Creation, then, may be the same as intruding. Something unnecessary. Unless there are doors. And walls, other obstacles set before us in the physical world. Anything else is a matter of construction without materials. A trick of limits. A borrowing from inside. She begged and begged and still wasn't allowed to use her given name, her tormentors referring to the platform agreed upon at the convention. Though even they couldn't remember how such a document came into existence before the first representatives had arrived. This is a common enough occurrence among tadpoles when they find they are free of the egg sac and yet they must still drag around some portion of yolk as though it were a growth. Or a portmanteau. I remember a time when everyone was sporting dinner jackets at all hours of the day. And when inquiries were made, rationalization came to the surface like some kind of sea monster. A creature enormous and shadowy and with all the wrong outlines. But looking, for all that, entirely inevitable, as if one couldn't imagine the ocean anymore without it. The whole concept of handing down memories as if they were twenty dollar gold coins is one fraught with difficulties and apt to get you laughed at in seminar. Though not for the first time. Separate your emotions, no matter how viscous or difficult to render with

charcoal or puns, from that which lies just beneath them. Which holds them at the surface like a raft. You'll see the former is so unlike the latter, it might just as well be its underling. Its idiot cousin. And what is the nature of this thing, if nature is the right word? How does it justify its existence when we never really sense that it's there? We can't even find where it is clearly implied, nor abstracted from some previous abstraction, like drawing water from air. And then turning around to sell it again for a dollar a bottle. Figures require of the present a recognition of law. An overlay of the universal necessary (we think) to make the present accept what we have been. This was the impetus of Euclid, of Aristarchus who willed his world without beginning, without clear end, and only then reverted to observation. But what interest have we in the impetus, who come late and know it merely as spice? Or acceleration? A kind of donning of the costume? There is plenty of time for an uprising, a revolt complete with shotgun blasts and tuba music. With people gathering together in the back of the wagon to start fumbling with one another's clothing. Whether you belong there or not is another story. One with its own specific way of getting around the allegory. Of throwing off whatever fancy rhetorical devices might otherwise stick to it like barnacles. The shape of the

expression begins to seem ovoid, as if it weren't too comfortable in its original packaging. And wished to forego the ceremony of promotion. The elbows, for instance, have more cache attached to them in virtually every culture on Earth, than does, say, the back of the knee. In fact, one should be able to determine rank by inverse proportion to the erogenous zones. The earlobes are so off-limits, by this measure, anyone caught rubbing them in public ought to spend a month or two in jail. And forfeit, as fine, his Lamborghini. Illness radiates outward from the impact zone like rumors. Or those salesmen who have a quota to meet and can't agree on which strategy is best. That perfected by the nuns in their hovels. Or that first sketched out on construction paper by juveniles trying to imagine a world where they are no longer situated at the bottom of the ladder. Where they are appreciated for the pleasant aromas that emanate from their mouths. It's like they always say – watch the bugs with brightly-colored legs. They got that way for a reason. But maybe the gift of olfactory sensation, when it's taken to such heights as one finds in the wolfhound, can filter through the hazards that hide from the mind otherwise, like pennywhistles. Or the bone fragments that float about in your hand for months and even years after you've scraped it across the concrete in a



fall. Or been escorted out the way I was – meaning by two or three women so beautiful and ultimately wrong-headed, I couldn't help but consider them refugees from some draconian set-up in the warehouse district. Victims of their own alluring present. And the void that had settled in behind their breastbones like a cousin come from the Midwest, dragging his suitcases behind -- his manuscript copies of the Polonaises and Mazurkas he had been working on all summer. We used to have to change the settings, adjust the numbers according to what we were trying to accomplish. Thirteen was sufficient to get the sun to slow down along its journey. Twenty-eight caused seizures in both friend and enemy. You couldn't be too choosy. And so here we are among the slavish and exiled, trying to convince them to part with fifty dollars. And the moon troubles us with its grand insinuations, its sweeping gestures that remind one of those of the ringmaster. Especially when he has only a week or two until retirement. And there is a sense among those who have known him since childhood that his heart is really with that woman he met just once. He hadn't thought through the procedure as thoroughly as perhaps he should have. But he was content just the same to feel the voices muffled, to feel whole again in some way not exactly identical with that he'd felt before the initial

operation. But clearly parallel to it. And perhaps even slightly more satisfying, in that he himself, his will, had been responsible for its occurring. Rather than simply dumb providence -- the act of getting born that way and then, growing old. The center alleges something against the periphery simply by its existence. It startles us awake the way a locomotive might when it de-rails in the neighborhood. It borrows its dignity from the pamphlets they hand out on the tarmac whenever the planes have been diverted to other parts of the country. Or the bottles shatter when the tenor lets loose in the corner. Who knows what he is thinking, why he wears his tie around his ankles like that, where he expects to wind up when the constables arrive and start pushing people around with their ponies. It's like when someone parks his hamburger cart on the corner and people line up for blocks. As if they had never heard of such a contrivance before. As if the very notion were something cooked up by the most obstinate Hegelians as a way of solving some riddle once and for all. That's when the commentators all give way to ads for vodka. And those who remember what vodka used to taste like start weeping profusely. They are not correct of mind. No matter how many times they pay cash for their couches. No matter if the stars arrange themselves in patterns we have never

seen before -- egg beaters, cotton panties -- and it becomes painfully obvious that the constitutions need their authors too. They can't just go on generating themselves out of nothing, like mushrooms. We are so close to the end of the workday, no one will know how to dampen our spirits without relying on duct tape. And various distressed animal sounds, captured on compact disc and sold at the local market for five dollars. Or auctioned off the way they auction Van Goghs on occasion. At least those that turn the self-portrait into something like a manifesto. A refurbishing of the spirit at the expense of the sinews and the tendons in the hand. Similarly, participles rank right up there with the end of the world, so far as the Eskimo is concerned. If I invest in his scheme for extracting meaning from the blue ice by way of pickaxe and the telling of tales with no hero in them, I will lose my shirt. And then the will begins to look like something complicit in the misery that follows us around like a shadow. Like one of those poems people used to cut out of the newspaper and kept in a shirt pocket so as to prevent their hearts turning to margarine. My exhibition with the double-necked guitar always went over well with my nieces and their gangly boyfriends, but who knows? Maybe we find such antics distasteful now for reasons that can't be explained or explicated. Reasons that start so deep

in our pasts, we aren't even aware of them. Though, borrowing a line from the Gettysburg Address, we might be expected to lose all inspiration once the Earth's orbit has been pointed out to us. Once it has been explained the way you might explain the molting process to a child. I follow markers to the place where they sell crabs, each of them tumbled in on top of the others, so that every container is crawling with knobby legs. The overseer hands me a pencil, assuming, I suppose, that I have been to college and so know which computation provides maximum results. This desire looks like a rodent not yet native to the area, but soon to be endemic. A creature they write monographs on before it has even had time to familiarize itself with the topography, with the brick towers and the wharves where people used to gather in great numbers. They shouted to one another through long metal tubes, sent messages attached to the collars of their dogs. Or imbedded in those Bolivian pop songs that revolve around a central premise. The infidelity of the loved one. The way she walks away even though we know she has seen us. We can tell by the odd angle of the hip bones, the posture like that we've seen on the Homecoming queens. Best to return to the underground caverns, then, to dissect the pigeons one finds on the dresser in the morning, their feathers a kind of

guarantee of the afterlife in that we no longer need a guarantee once there is such thing as feathers. Once the sky itself gets to feeling abject, in need of succor. I'm in the same place as always, wondering if you remember our address. That we spent a night in Algiers. It's not like I saw the crime with my own eyes. We know there are cubicles where you can hang a photo of someone you love and expect that it will be there the next morning. When you arrive to take up the work that no one else seems willing to consider. But why should we find there a scent of cinnamon, as well? A girl with a diamond stud pushed through the corner of her lip? She is about the same age as your first girlfriend, and possesses many of the same mannerisms. But there are indications of much deeper disturbances lurking just beneath the surface. A penchant for showing complete strangers the soles of her feet. A license to practice what they call, in the corridors of higher learning, "medical massage". But which is really just a kind of manipulating other people's shoulders for an exorbitant fee. If only we had access to the searchlights, to the bandages with pictures of rabbits on them! And not just any sort of rabbit, mind you, but that which made our childhoods lighter because it was forever willing to take on the punishment for our sins. Was willing to address its

soliloquies to the people responsible for the screen door. And those insects that kept getting wedged in it. As if they had seen, on the other side, a vision of some place so beautiful, words were inadequate to its description. Though there are plenty of people who have tried to find them anyway. And the list of their words is endless – including, of course, elastic. And Pantomime. I suppose I own the rights to the underlying image. But I can't remember what it is. Something feline, no doubt. Or laced with particles from elsewhere. Tin. Long strands of hair. And past the corner store, another corner. A radio playing parts of a symphony unhooked and re-arranged, like boxcars carrying poorly-upholstered furniture. Thousands of chickens in pens. The benefits detract from the view, make you think of the consistency of water when there is no water. When your thirst is something so habitual the children start to comment on it when they are still in their pajamas. The others are pressing for a blanket statement to make them feel at ease, but you know there are better ways of dealing with the dilemma. You can stand at the buffet table and refuse to let anyone pass. You can alter the pitch and timbre of your voice by pulling at the skin on your throat. Who hasn't fiddled with the notion of buying one's socks in bulk? So as to be able to brag about it to those who still rely solely

on their spouses to keep their feet warm, and out of the light that might otherwise damage them. The only sense we can make of this after our showers, after we've agreed to stroll hand-in-hand down the toll road, is to compare it to the moment when we wake up and find something's different. Something has been altered. That moment when you know she isn't going to call again any time soon. Or write those cryptic notes that begin and end with the symbol of infinity. But still! one might not be asking too much for a postcard, say. Or even a scrawl across a napkin. Something left in the lowest branches of the tree that is almost always littered with debris anyway. Scraps of newspaper. Someone's hairnet tossed out the window of a car traveling at a very high rate of speed. Movement is the first principle, the standard by which we measure all things. And if there is no movement? Then there is no object, nothing to differentiate that particular mass from any other particular mass, no matter the colors involved or the taxonomy. Even the Wyandot knew color is just another way of discussing movement. Of turning it into something with a calling card, a letter of introduction. At some point, we must replace all names with our own. If this alters the meaning of the tales -- if it changes where we first found them, for instance -- then we must consider starting over.

Letting the circles abandon their central point and expand outward, each portion searching farther afield than its neighbor. So that what you have isn't recognizable anymore as itself. Or even as part of something else. This is why I examine the document as carefully as my questionable eyesight will allow, looking for any indication of who might have thought it necessary to get in touch with me after I had made it explicit that I had no more desire to communicate with anyone. That I would be recuperating somewhere close to the island of Java for at least another year, but my exact location would not be disclosed, even to those who thought they might need to know it most earnestly. The Brahman with their remarkable sense of the exclusive. The perennially hopeful tied up in knots by the pain of poor digestion, by the olive salad working its miracles yet again. So much for the idea of dignity, of preparing yourself for the worst degradation they can throw at you! This is just the sort of thing I'd expect from a painter who has run out of inspiration. Who spends his days remembering the women who posed for him and those who simply refused. Citing a proper upbringing, I suppose. Or a susceptibility to draughts. All the usual litany of excuses you think you have escaped once you are out of trade school. With its typing classes and its empty gymnasium. Not that I think the



narrative needs doctoring. It's just that we might have to put the Halloween masks back in the kitchen drawer where we first discovered them. Because who is going to believe they just appeared there, out of nowhere, like weather balloons? You want to report them to the church authorities, at least let them know that something is amiss. Something has ventured down your winding driveway and set up shop. All in the middle of the night, when the rest of us are still out looking for people to love us despite our obvious flaws. When the pamphlets appear at such regular intervals, those who do most of the reading turn a blind eye to them because they are accustomed to more substantive fare. The kind of thing that used to come out of Bulgaria with a fur coat over its shoulders. And twigs and leaves tangled up in its hair. Just as soon as you turn your eyes toward the object, it disintegrates. Not as object, but prop. The pocket may hold what it will before we arrive. And once we get there, it has no obligation beyond that imposed on it by gravity. By the weight of what it contains. But who would argue with the minor details? Who would insist on examining the written records? There are moments when we remember the proper way to behave only after its time has come and gone, after we have made such fools of ourselves in the company of uncles and accomplices, we

wonder if there is ever a moment when we are not vulnerable. When we can just let the world slide along its trajectory any way it sees fit. Though even the Sri Ramakrishna understood humiliation is one thing, and hunger pangs quite another. We can't abide a world where one object is identical, ultimately, with the next, where badgers are apt to turn up in your kitchen cupboards and there is little you can do about it short of chasing them out the front door with a broom. Visually, this presents difficulties, inasmuch as we can't get our eyes around so many colors and so many textures in action at once. They meld into one another the way the tributaries of the Arkansas do when it has been raining for more than, say, fifty days. The woman runs her slippers through four or five cycles, never once taking her eyes off the window in the front of the machine. What she sees is not her face so much, nor the movement of the clothes inside, but a strange hybrid of both. Which makes her think, naturally enough, that there are more important things than standing still. Calisthenics. Writing about wine. Discussing the relative merits and tannins of one bottle or another on a radio program where the audience is encouraged to call in and beg. And why not abandon yourself to such degradation, such infamy and bad taste? she thinks on her way to undo

the lock on her storage shed. Why not give the pill bugs time to unwind? Of course, she couldn't have known of the windshear and down drafts such unfortunate creatures must encounter almost every day of their short and bewildering lives. But even had she known, who would have had the heart to include them? Who would have thought that far ahead? How we know something is never as interesting as what we wear, the dunce caps pointing to the North Star. We have been fooled into thinking the soil is not so much an enemy of the flesh as an accomplice. That thing that takes us back to our origins with a smile on its lips as big as the Red River. But only where it narrows a bit to squeeze between pilings. You can't expose that much of your thigh without conditioning the other party in ways that have yet to be examined in the journals. And yet, she follows the maps religiously, spots the aqueducts a mile away and leaves her souvenirs behind – astrolabes, hair of the false prophet. All on the very westernmost tip, as if she is concerned about her reputation, but only to a minimal degree. The same as might enter into calculations of the thickness of a snail shell. Or those moments when we are hanging precariously between a future that has no real meaning and a past so thick with it, those around us have literally to start gasping for air. Perhaps they have closed

their books and are sitting on the couch. The thunder reaches them, but the sound is so weak as to be easily mistaken for something else. Where does this leave the observer? In his coat. In the field where there are no places to sit down comfortably. To keep the leaf litter, the debris off his trousers. He is thirsty, no doubt. And aware of the insignificant sounds around him. Or maybe he has been in the crate for four hours before he manages to escape, manages to undo whichever latches might have otherwise seemed like perfectly engineered machinery – the type of structure you are expected to stumble on in dreams when the dreams don't have some ulterior motive. Like reminding you of the party you got invited to on Arapaho Lane, but which has since slipped your mind. And it's important you at least make an appearance, because someone who is expected to be present there holds the key to your future, even if it's not entirely clear how such power has descended to him in the first place. Or what exactly this key consists of, why it must forever move from one person to the next, like a virus. And I don't mean the kind they give to kids at the restaurants. Though those are pretty nice too. And if the form is pleasant to the touch, even if it is only appealing to the eye, we will not shrink from it once we're past the age of, say, thirty-five. Once we've become comfortable with

the disparate nature of our experience, with the fact that what we want differs from day to day, much as the sky never seems to decide where it should be in relation to the soil. Sometimes it is distant and full of cranes and sparrows. And sometimes it is as close as the membrane that covers one's lips. It's ok to let the operations of nature run rampant, so long as you keep them contained within a circumference, say, of about ten inches. Any more than that will get us to thinking about the day when we misplaced our nametags and the others in the room couldn't resist whispering into one another's ears and letting their tongues dart out now and then and catch the flesh there and turn their listeners into accomplices, into veterans of the elderberry patch, with little more than a drop of saliva. And words as vulgar as an opera by Meyerbeer, though not as expensive. They cut in line ahead of us at the Cineplex. We haven't been since the plovers died, and we have no reason to go now, unless you count the depth of the water in the holes your shoes make every time you step on the grass. And the lunch wagon hasn't arrived yet, but the jugglers have. Sometimes the knowledge comes after the event in question, and sometimes it comes into focus a month or two before, as if it has been lying there all along in solution, and we had merely to pour over it a bit of lemon juice like

they do in the spy novels. Though, of course, there the procedure is reversed, the citrus being the thing that makes the alphabet disappear. And it is water that brings it back again. But you get the idea. If it's not the details that matter, it's the concept that burns you with the end of its cigarette. And I've known plenty of people who didn't want to risk investment in either one, saying they had known others duped by the world's habit of showing you something remarkable in its left hand, while picking your pocket with its right. In fact, they consider the world the kind of place where, if you were to find yourself afoot in it, it might be best to keep your hands in your pockets and your eyes aimed straight ahead, lest someone misinterpret your poise, your bow tie, for something that approximates cleverness. Self-sufficiency, and therefore pride. And to this end, you should know the limits have nothing to do with time and space. They are better understood as tales with no particular moral, no exegesis or tradition to speak of. They simply pop up one day when your favorite aunt is bored with the puppets that stab one another on tv. And she insists something transcendent must occur right there, in the living room, pronto. That her mind can not be expected to support its own weight forever. Perspiration reminds the epicure of what he has been missing. Of how he arranged

his life according to principles that seem in retrospect to include too many variables. Short cuts to the art museum through weedy lots and garbage-strewn alleys. Vertical ascents without benefit of safety harnesses and goggles to cut down on the glare. It's the sort of realization that takes one to the edge of the waterfall in the middle of the night when the spotlights have been turned off and the only thing visible is the curtain of spray. Or makes you battle the most notorious aspects of the elements like wind and an uncle's cologne, without ever seeing the end of the field, the mansion with its flowers by van Huysum hanging in the foyer and the lady standing beside a clay reproduction of her own lopsided feet. The toes remind one of the interrelation of all things, the ecology of numbers and snack foods, the most promising of which turns out to be, as well, the least expensive. The request comes in too late, but they try to fill it anyway. Using forms that look like saddles. Stacking them in the corner until the ravens arrive and start dancing around that way they have – indicating something is not right in the nearby meadow. Better to scrub pages, cleanse them of whatever ink settled in patterns. Made elders bristle, or proud, even though they had no hand in the description. In the hacking at the surface with knives. You don't have to pay attention to the niceties. You just

have to get off the tightrope and make your greetings. Otherwise, there are consequences which don't appear obvious at first sight – they linger in the shadows like ermine. But once they arrive, there is no mistaking their origins. They carry their creation around with them the way we carry bones in our face. In fact, treatment of the one implies treatment of the other. You can not salve salve. And if this is a blasphemous notion, at least it is one of the most current, and not to be confused with those that got one thrown onto a donkey cart once upon a time. And paraded about town. To the gallows. All in a driving snow. Still, confusion reigned, until one young man decided to change all that by simply erecting billboards all along one side of the river, and if you wished to have something placed there – a marriage proposal, say, or a grievance that gnawed at the core of you like a snake – you paid him fifty dollars and climbed up and did all the painting yourself. It's like that tree in Paletinus' garden on which three of his wives hung themselves in succession, and then his friends and neighbors all clamored for the cuttings. Perhaps they were expecting something to come of nothing, which is how we often hear the universe described – a kind of deep pit into which you might throw everything you have ever heard, seen, or felt, and not receive in kind so much as a whisper.



*Eucalyptus* (Otoliths, 2011)

*In which the fish in the tank exhibit tints not otherwise found in the natural world. Certainly not the oceans where color is obscured by the flotsam on the surface. And the boredom that sets in whenever the floor is too far away. Or the moon has wandered to the wrong side of the sky. The net necessity throws is iron mesh and see-through. Something picked up at the bait store in a place where there is nothing but bait stores. Row after row of them on both sides of the avenue. It is late. People are talking on the phone. We know at some point a woman will emerge and she will be covered in blood. Our hearts race at the thought of it because the heart is, at bottom, cruel. An organ plucked from some prehistoric fish and sewn in, still beating.*

The shrub emits sounds like those you remember coming from the church organ. Only they don't soothe or terrify in equal measure. They seem to be speaking a language I might be able to decipher should I spend the evening with a coat draped over my head. And *The Great Gatsby* opened to page 74. It's a passage I must have highlighted in the past and whenever I try to determine the reason, whenever I attempt to open the past like the skin of an avocado, there are repercussions that don't become obvious until many years later. Sometimes we wonder how it is the mountains keep from disintegrating immediately, especially given the

unstable materials they are made of, the sub-atomic waves and the magma, the bones of unimaginable beasts. Then the imagination takes over and it does a reputable job. It fleshes out pterosaurs fallen to earth with diseases that are still pretty active. Viruses and other microbes that live on the skin and mostly go unnoticed. Though Immanuel knows they are there and he can't sleep at night because of the itching that may or may not be all in his head. I try to untie the knot in his bolo, but am forced finally to resort to a kitchen knife. And when I slice a small portion of my pinkie off, the blood seems to belong to someone else. It has that quality about it of old photographs, of phrases uttered once and then abandoned. Is it possible our endeavors make us frail at precisely the same time they are preparing us to journey to the arctic or dive to the bottom of the sea with one of those large brass helmets on our heads and a hose sticking out of it, running to the surface even if the surface is too far away to see? I list the attributes I expect from those who are at the surface, feeding the hose out, keeping it from getting kinked up in the middle. But no sooner have I finished than I am starting another because the first went on for three pages. And who can possibly live up to everything listed there? Who, for instance, might dress well, even fashionably, but not care about others' opinions?

Who could possibly know where Clipperton Island is without having been there, without even having looked for it on a map?

*In which a man walks into the desert, searching the chaparral for something we can imagine but we can't put into words. Or we can put it into words but those words change the nature of the thing. They make it both tangible and false. The sort of image one finds on a piece of fabric, superimposed there with a projector or laser. The image moves with the breeze. It changes shape because it is not fundamental. The fabric is. Everyday despair is always one of the options. It is a corollary, an endnote containing additional text the author deems, for some reason, superfluous. But which might seem to us fascinating because it holds the key to how he thinks. How he creates by slicing everything away.*

In the soil, under one seedpod, another. Only this one has been altered using the latest technology, the latest theories concerning genetics that I do not understand. This doesn't mean I am not tested on them repeatedly. It just means that I am forced to cheat. And when the results arrive, I can hear the thunder in the distance even though the horizon isn't that far away and it is clear as a piece of glass. This is what

they mean by indecision, what they want you to remember as the house goes up in flames. Rescue somebody. It doesn't have to be anyone in particular. It doesn't even have to be someone you like or admire. The back passage is littered with corroded batteries and somebody says we need them to light the way. Too bad they have been used up, the life drained from them like blood from the chickens on Sunday. Immanuel took pictures even though he didn't like what he was seeing through the viewfinder, which must have been a myriad of images all thrown together, re-arranged by the narcotics he was taking for inflammation. I distrust this account, though, for the simple reason that it was rendered by disinterested parties, by people who had no more investment in the outcome than they did in the Kentucky Derby, something I determined for myself by asking a few questions. And it's not like we try to wind up on the other side of the ravine. Every slack rope, after all, has to lead somewhere. It's just that we want to be able to claim we had no choice in the matter, that the backdrop you see before you – with its heavy allotment of pistachio trees, and its wind gusts represented by curly white brush strokes, as if the artist couldn't find any way to depict movement using those things that are actually visible, changing the angle of the leaves, say, where they attach to the branches,

or blurring the blades of the weathervane – the backdrop is not the same as we paid three hundred dollars for just a month previous. Perhaps someone stepped in and made everything conform to his own particular vision, which is a selfish thing to do, to be sure, but not altogether without precedent. Immanuel himself drew a tutu on the statue of the unidentified general that stands in the square downtown. He used magic marker and it washed off in the rain, but still, for an hour or two before that, people were screaming! They refused to be consoled when we offered them chocolate, when I explained that what they were seeing was not the same thing – by definition – as what was actually out there but which they couldn't see. There is no way of understanding this, I said, without stepping out of yourself the way a man steps out of his own shoes without meaning to. On the sidewalk, say, when he is running after the bus.

*In which we wonder if we weren't perhaps promised something more elaborate than this. If we should have trouble distinguishing between what's real and what merely probable. Our knowledge creeps up on us like an animal, a carnivore, something enormous in the shadows but poorly defined and at home more in the myths we tell about it than the textbooks where we document its actual size and habits.*

*Its routines that seem exactly the same as those of the lowly housecat. Or the man up the street who dreams all night about caterpillars. Imagine if we could somehow get beyond this point, if we could dissolve all bonds by taking advanced chemistry classes at the technical school. If we could find a name for that overwhelming sense of burden and decay that settles on us come morning when we discover there is nothing left in our pockets.*

The windows are made opaque by a process that has been described previously, so I won't get into it. The author of that particular treatise warrants closer inspection, though, because he is a mythical figure in those parts of the world where they are chronically short on mythical figures. They unseat them almost as quickly as they're made. And the citizens don't so much wail for what it is they're missing as cough a lot. As if respiratory ailments are directly attributable to the hole in the middle of the communal narrative. That hole almost always reminds me of an empty snail shell of the sort I find now more frequently in the backyard. The rain washes them off the trees and into the grass and they fill up with water and change colors because of the moisture, so that when I dry them, I am almost inevitably disappointed by what I've found. Eulalie suggests this says more about me than it does the shells; it says

something about my inability to value that which doesn't remain un-altered from morning until dusk, when we are all prone to suffering this same ailment. As a consequence, she tries to hide the slip of paper in her palm, but Immanuel knows immediately what this means and starts whistling and pointing and rolling his eyes in an exaggerated fashion. He makes such a racket, even I ask him to stop because there is something to be said for subtlety in discussing the conflicts of the heart. Besides, Immanuel's eyesight seems to be going. Ever since he got into the habit of smoking hash with the woman who lives up the street. With the semi-emaciated frame and the startling green eyes. We wish sometimes to reverse the order of appearance, to resume where we left off when we weren't aware that we had left off. But such longing only leads to other, more concrete forms of longing, that themselves never manage to create even the illusion of consistency or satiety, of actually possessing what we lay our fingers on. Perhaps the yogis were right when they came through town on the lecture circuit and declared all lectures obsolete, all audiences full of the very people who ought to be speaking. Or maybe that too was just a ploy like the salesman's feigning a history of heart trouble upon his first making your acquaintance. Or

the child's sudden, hysterical fear of caves when there are no known caves in the vicinity.

*In which all longing originates somewhere in the pituitary gland. It starts out as an enzyme and quickly adds dimensions to itself through purely accidental accretion. You find yourself in the elevator, for instance, when you have no business on the floor above. Or below. When you should be perfectly content to ply your wares at ground level. But there is something about traveling in some manner other than the horizontal that makes us long to experience the world, however briefly, as some other life form. An amoeba, say. With its ability to switch directions at the slightest touch. To surround and overwhelm its closest neighbor in a paroxysm that looks a lot like love.*

Thirty-eight steps lead to the dock that juts out into the lake, though the angle seems peculiar, as if it has been determined by someone with a disease of the left eye rather than by the ice that is even now pushing up against it on all sides. Somewhere out there, on the other shore, or beyond, a man is tapping on pieces of rock to make tones and then discarding those that don't seem entirely pure. Imagine if you were to paint pictures of faces on those stones and then barter with them for your supplies, those



that will take you through winter and beyond, those that will determine how well you sleep and what you see in your dreams when you do sleep, what you see in the morning when you wake up, and what you see after everyone else, unfortunately, has lost his eyesight. Due to the toxins in the water. Due to the effects of old age. I try to clear my mind of the image that has sent me out here the way you erase something from a chalkboard, assuming of course you have one in front of you. And there is something written on it, something that helped others get images in their heads and kept them there, at least long enough to solve a problem or communicate an important truth. The sky, with its intermittent host of travelling geese, its odd way of shifting in place without seeming to change its location, suggests all such truths have been dislodged now. They reside in the cellar with the cobwebs and the bottles emptied of their contents, even the lettering, raised at one time and detectable through the touch, worn flush now with the surrounding glass. Why wouldn't we want to examine those things that tear at us in the middle like swallowed fishhooks? Why wouldn't we recognize the importance of staying sane? The ground gives way to ground of a separate texture, moves under the foot like it's trying to get away. I see Eulalie propped up on one elbow, whispering

something that doesn't coalesce, doesn't form for my ear any more than does the image of the far ends of her, the ankles and the feet disappearing into the shadows and the mist with such insistency, I spend the next three or four days trying to conjure them and only them, trying to bring them back from that inaccessible place they occupy. But all such endeavor is bound to create monsters, to engender them from nothing and then release them upon the world where they will inevitably do the Devil's bidding. Or at least suggest someone has been doing some sort of bidding and whoever it is isn't all that interested in remaining civil.

*In which we expect luck to descend from its perch more frequently than it is capable. We see it at work in the lives of those we despise, or know only from their faces being plastered on billboards. And we think the numbers don't add up. They abandon the center like bees abandon the hive. Chased out by cold weather, say. Or smoke. By pheromones – those hymns and fragments that trace their origins far beyond the Latin. My second grade teacher's name was Fish. Like something you pull from canals. With a piece of corn as bait. A rusty hook. This doesn't mean, however, we can simply overlook her. The memory of her arms alone causes the sort of longing one is reluctant to discuss with anyone until after the age of, say, sixty-one. And then there is no retrieving that reticence. No desire for any but the most*

*obscene reflections. A turning the past into one long, and only rarely interrupted, burlesque.*

The fear is of losing something you don't even possess, of giving it away through your own lack of imagination much the way we drop pennies into canisters we haven't bothered to read the label on the outside of. Sometimes they are not really going to charitable organizations or causes. Sometimes they are staying put until such time as we have been given a reprieve. And we didn't even know the sentence had been handed down in the first place. Immanuel joins me at the settlement close by, offers to sew up the holes in my flesh, but I am intent on finding the place I've dreamt about since the time I was ten. A long watershed, a shack set back at the edges, its roof rusting in the cold sun and everywhere the sound of starlings. A rumor of moose. A paragraph hanging in the air like a spaceship of the sort we used to trace on tracing paper. My eyes were no good then; they often felt as if they had been dredged up from the very bottom of the pile, turned over once on a lathe and then shipped to their destination without a bar code, without the Powers-That-Be approving either their preparation or their use for sensitive, ultimately useless operations. The letter of the law here requires we

admit our own guilt whenever we believe we are guilty, but to suppress it otherwise, so that the dilemma is one of our own choosing, though it did not originate with us. It was handed down in various envelopes, carried from one corner of the state to another by a courier service still utilizing horses.

*In which a woman runs off and almost no one notices. When she returns, ragged and torn, decidedly ill-used and worse-tempered, the people of the town all turn their backs. They encourage their children to throw stones. And if not stones, then tin cans with pictures of the ocean on them. They tell their children stories with the woman in them, stories they adapt from other stories they heard themselves as children. These original stories contained no moral. They simply revolved around a creature so loathsome, it decided finally to drown itself. But instead managed only to frighten the water out of the pond. It made the meadows go cobalt when it passed.*

Whoever is represented, she doesn't necessarily appreciate the gesture. And she doesn't show up in the same attire she left in, which suggests the interval is one of deeper mystery than we might at first have supposed. Still, I vote for pursuing the matter to its furthest reaches, even if those only happen to be as deep as your coat pockets. I am in the

minority and resist announcing any further details about my own biography, but the uproar is so sudden and persistent I agree to sketch out something on the chalkboard. This involves lines going both forward and back, with little boxes of text between them and I try to make the lettering so minuscule as to preclude the audience's determining what exactly is being written down. It is a trick I remember from our days in the academy, spent wandering the corridors with people who knew both our first and last names but who seemed to operate without any ascertainable identity of their own. That must be a plus in the business that gets taken care of there, but out here, among the owls and the pecan trees and the snakes with their finely woven skins, it causes people to glance out of the corners of their eyes and drag too long on the Coca-Cola bottles they have raised to their lips. As if on cue, she staggers forward, stunned perhaps by a blow to the back of the head or some revelation that she had not been expecting, and then the lights suddenly dim on all parts of the scene but her lovely shoulders. Is this due to some astronomical effect perfectly, if coincidentally, timed, or is it the handy-work of memory itself which always seems to have its fingers on the effects board – changing tint here and raising audio there, until we begin to suspect it doesn't trust the content very much; it

doesn't believe what actually happened should be allowed to fend for itself. It's an accusation she first popularized by putting it in a song, and then refusing to sing it, refusing even to let others capture the chord progressions for posterity because she said she didn't believe in chord progressions any more than she believed in that fiction we referred to as posterity when we might just as well have been calling it something else. Like antonyms. Or grape jelly. And I tried to mend things then by reading to her nights from the diaries of vicious men, but she knew there wasn't anything we could do. The locusts were on the arbors two streets over and the sound they made is one that sticks with me to this very day – a humming like one's mother might have made in the rocking chair in the deep, black hours of the morning. If, of course, one's mother happened to be a locust.

*In which our memories are colored by the present in such minute ways as to keep us from identifying them. You can test the truth of the proposition by opening your eyes at the very moment when you are bringing back the feel and sinister taste of your first kiss. Notice that the candle burning on the mantle is turning that moment into something tinged with smoke. And the television is running advertisements for vacations in Bimini. Is this simply coincidence? Of course not. Everyone knows there are points on the compass that overlap. And when we find*

*ourselves faced with these -- occupying them almost, the way you might be said to occupy the place on the floor where your shoes rest, even when you are not wearing them -- we should act as if nothing has changed. As if the day itself were numbered among ten thousand of the same. And the only way you can tell the difference between them is to go back and label those that you wish to set apart, you wish to assign meaning. Not because they actually contain any. But because to desire something is almost the same as guaranteeing that it will not happen.*

Eulalie says measure out anything that registers on the scale, examine it thoroughly under a microscope and with the naked eye, and only then are you likely to determine that corporeal things are perhaps the least interesting of all objects. And admit finally that you have been approaching your own life from precisely the wrong direction. Some place that smells of avocados and even looks a little like the pit that sits in the center of them, inasmuch as it turns on itself and is speckled and you'd like, on occasion, to put it in your mouth. But, she says, the benefit of doing so is questionable right from the start. The kind of thing they used to hold debates about in the local parochial schools because they were running low on other topics. Because they had a strict time limit and rules and procedures to obey which have since -- for one carefully considered reason or

another -- been jettisoned. Is it any wonder I request to lie at night in the shed, to keep company with whatever might be in there, even if it is only a pair of shears and a muskrat got separated from the river? The paperwork arrives a week later, says I will have to wait for still more paperwork that hasn't been mailed yet because whoever is in charge of digging it up can't remember which pile it is in. He's not even sure of the room, though I question this assertion openly, coming as it does second- or even third-hand. Such things have a habit of revolving around themselves until they generate a sinister form of gravity. It pulls everything in the vicinity into it and there is nothing left. This is why you see bare places on the lawn sometimes. And hundreds of millions of wicked little holes in people's skin.

*In which the slogans seem almost endless, with themes and repetition. Climaxes and those bits of wordplay you often expect of gifted children. But you are caught off guard nonetheless when they utter them. As if this is the one place where everything follows from what came before it as certainly as rivers follow the lines on the map we've assigned them. Some will claim this is just coincidence. But you can't accept that and still put your shoes on in the morning. You can't accept that and still recognize there is a need we all feel to pursue things that don't actually belong*



*to us and probably never will. We examine our desires so closely the pores in the skin become visible. And the aromas swirl around us like stars on the outer bands of a galaxy. Maybe not even the one we occupy at present. But one of those said to be so far away, it takes light half a million lifetimes just to make it from there to here. And partially explains why I never feel like answering any questions.*

You're never sure if the light blinking at the edge of the screen is supposed to be there. Maybe no one else can see it and you are in store for a stroke or a message from another planet. I think I hear something slightly suggestive – a whimpering, a faraway moaning like that one expects to accompany films that have been made in shady places in Korea. We try to shield ourselves by throwing tarps over hastily-constructed wooden frames, by admitting we get excited by things that horrify others. Skin maladies. Yo-yos that get stuck at the end of the string. Immanuel says he wonders where the butchers are. The shopkeepers. Why aren't they filing past in orderly rows, holding up their meat cleavers and hand-painted signs demanding a voice? Even if it is a bit squeaky and difficult to understand. Maybe Eulalie is right when she says I am responsible, I am the sort of person she dreamt about when she was younger. The sort who grabbed her ankles as she was trying to climb the

stairs. Despite my protestations, she claims these were not nightmares. In fact, they didn't even occur at night, but only when she drifted off while lying in the orchard, the scent of ripening peaches filling her nostrils and the breeze keeping the yellowjackets at bay. But where does this leave me? How am I supposed to respond to accusations that don't end up being accusations at all, at least according to the person who is making them? She seems to think I am simply to take her word for everything. Like how thick the river mud is. And where the trombone sounds are coming from. And I admit, I am inclined to hand over all responsibility to those who seem most to deserve our praise. Even if they have kept secrets from me. Even if they have touched other people on those parts of the body that long to be touched. It is like the time I climbed the mountain at the edge of town and everyone kept telling me on the way up that there was a place where the trail became so narrow as to allow only the most unsullied to pass, the pure of heart who have made themselves right with the cosmos by denying the cosmos any real power to harm. This is accomplished through meditation and a certain closing of one's eyes to the most obvious counterexamples. But when you try to establish who fits the bill and who has simply arrived by accident, drawn by the confetti, the promise of wealth and

relaxation in equal measure (not to mention the funnel cakes), the boundaries blur and even the substance contained by those boundaries, no matter what that substance might be. It's only after the announcer tells those in the audience it is time to go home -- the snow is coming and the roads will get hazardous -- that you realize nothing you have ever attempted has worked out the way you envisioned it. Nothing, in fact, has worked out at all. Eulalie closes her eyes. She holds one hand out stiffly, as if it is in pain. We might as well color our hair with dyes ordinarily used on fabric, she says. The sort of thing you discover in drums in the woods behind the house. Not your house, to be sure, she says. Just a house at the edge of the woods, where someone used to live. Maybe he owned it. Maybe he was squatting there until his Social Security kicked in.

*In which pallbearers are required. This is one of those plain truths children pick up on even when they are oblivious to pretty much everything else. Except the skin tone of frogs and what chalk tastes like. They see with their fingers, borrowing images from the things they touch the way we borrow cash from relatives. With no intention of returning it. Or even acting as if we are in anyone's debt. This is why there are mornings when the mist that rises off the plant life in the backyard reminds one of eons long past. When oceans lapped at the places where no ocean is ever to be found*

*again. From this distance, one is reminded of that belief of Bernini's that there is a characteristic gesture or facial expression one makes right before speaking or immediately after. One that reveals the true thoughts hidden inside the head. And Bernini made it his mission to capture that gesture in stone.*

Someone tosses a beer can at the wall and the sound it makes upon contact sits inside my skull, just above the back teeth, the molars, and refuses to go away. It takes up residence and I begin talking to it, I do, I am not afraid to admit this. This causes my lips to move on occasion and those who might be inclined to observe me are aware, no doubt, that something is amiss. Perhaps no one is assigned that duty any longer. I notice fewer and fewer strangers glancing in my direction. And the radio seems perfectly content to let people play their Hawaiian guitars on it. To interrupt them only now and then with news of what might be happening overseas, in places with names sometimes twenty syllables in length. The others point out that rodents are showing up in increasing numbers. But the racket they make dwindles to a mere scratching at the timber or the bustle of their bodies moving over one another at modest speed. I suggest we track them using collars with low-

frequency sound generators attached to them the way they do in the movies, but my motion is ignored by Immanuel and all the rest (there is not so much as a vote). He says the problem resides solely in my head. He describes it using terms he lifted from the manuals you find in doctors' offices. Or in the dumpsters outside once there has been an update in the edition. Once they have been visited by the representatives of whichever publishing firm handles these enormous tomes. This is not the kind of certainty I am privy to, I say. No, Immanuel agrees, reluctantly. That type requires exertion and the restriction of calories beforehand. It requires studying up on the techniques most likely to induce visions. And then there is a certain concern for sanitation and for establishing who has earned the right to be here and who has simply attached himself to the others the way lampreys attach themselves to the underside of larger fish.

*In which as a result of the things we say and the things we don't say because we don't have to, our loved ones join the clubs that spring up clandestinely in other people's basements. Where grown human beings gather to exercise their demons, their insecurities using papier-mâché masks. Constructed on the spot. And painted lava red, gourd yellow. Hallucinations have this way of creeping up on you*

*precisely when you are looking most carefully for them. When you have read an account of someone suffering in ways you didn't even know it was possible to suffer. How the human mind undoes itself as a matter of course! As if it too has had enough of the people lined up outside the courthouse. Their hands thrown protectively over the shoulders of their children. Ask them: Where does it all end? How does one become a flâneur? Their eyes go glassy, they pull themselves up to their full height. And still, you can see the sky behind their heads. It is full of birds wheeling about in delight. Or something that looks like delight, but is, in all probability, just aimless movement predicated on fear.*

The bickering begins over a bottle of ouzo, takes twenty minutes to reach its crescendo and then fades into a dull throb without any words. Picture the windowsills covered in spores, the baitfish running for the shallows. Immanuel takes his cue and interrupts at the precise point where everything is beginning to come together, to coalesce in the listener's mind around the merest germ of comprehension. An image brought up by half a syllable, dredged from the murk where it has been lying, unused and miserable, for more than twenty years. He says the floorboards are weak from the foot traffic in that part of the building and to demonstrate he jumps up and down in place until a certain cracking sound can be detected, but only if you close your mind off to every other possibility. If you make it as uniform in texture as a piece of bread. And why wouldn't we be

startled then to discover our own visages on the postage stamps adorning the letters that show up in our mailboxes? When we have been out of the country for a month, say, and the itinerary included desert countries all but forgotten by the modern world. Places where the Victrolas get played in tents and the dust and the sand grit muffle the sound of the trombones. But there is something to be said for attempting to finish whatever project you have set out upon anyway, even when the sky is just feet above your head. Immanuel gets visibly angry when I suggest he is looking to make more enemies than he had in high school, recognizing, I suppose, a jibe that otherwise might have remained well hidden (if, for example, it had been aimed at someone else). He couldn't figure out the calculus, kept trying to re-invent it in his head between problems, hoping to avoid the embarrassment that inevitably followed. The brazen interrogation by the other members of his clan -- his pack almost -- the hooting that sent the small animals, the armadillos and the calico cats, scurrying for the closest stand of maple trees and the honeysuckle cover beneath them. With the memory of it, he rolls down the window on the passenger side of the van, tosses his cigarette out without bothering to have lit it and announces to the world rushing past that he is now a man of distinction and should

be treated as such, should be acquiesced to and delivered of exotic fruit and fresh linens whenever such things are available. Or dollar bills and tamales whenever they are not.

*In which the dishwasher runs audibly in an adjoining room. Sounds, in fact, as if it has been tinkered with recently. And the guilty party left some of his equipment inside. Of course, no one knows why we wind up with parts of ourselves missing. And they don't have to be important parts either. They can simply be those that accrued accidentally to something that was indeed important at one time in the history of the organism. But which has itself been replaced since. Or rendered unnecessary by a stranger altering things after hours. There will be signs, of course, carved into the bark of the trees by those who went before us. And if we take our time and examine these signs with a magnifying glass, we are apt to discover that they all point in different directions. It's almost as if someone wants us to get lost. But doesn't want to be too obvious about it. Doesn't want to be discovered standing around in his bathrobe, twirling the ends of his handlebar mustache.*

Fewer and fewer options materialize -- step, as it were, from behind the wall -- until you are left with just the wall. And sometimes a velocity determined by laws you never could quite figure out. Where did they come from? Why did they insist on certain numbers and behaviors and not



others? How without pattern must something be, quantitatively speaking, to be considered fully random? It's not like we remember the clam bakes and the garage sales without first imposing restrictions on them. They must occur in daylight, for instance, or behind a structure that was later to be torn down. Because of code violations, because of illicit activity on the top floors. I sleep the first shift, then the second, and before I know it, those who came with me decide they have had enough of my incompetence and tie me up with a rope. Things could get ugly, but they don't. We mention only what is necessary to furthering the story and leave out what is, by most estimations, of greatest import. But this procedure itself is one we learned from other people and ought therefore to be abandoned as tacky. As wasteful and smacking of incest, or at the very least, venereal disease. Later, the alligators show up at the pier, expecting someone to toss chicken parts over the railing because, apparently, Tuesdays are the traditional day for taking pity on those who share the world with us, those who could make things uncomfortable by announcing what it is they've witnessed when the rest of us weren't even aware of their presence. Of course, this would require a sudden onset of language skills not likely to emerge unless there is some sorcery involved. And a little

bit of monkeying around by Providence, something that hasn't happened since the days of the Crusaders. Especially those children who strapped on the armor and then disappeared into the mists of history. Probably winding up as slaves or something. As the objects of paintings themselves long since returned to the materials of which they were first composed. What is the term for the parts being representative of the whole? And how is it that the parts are somehow more crucial than that which they make up, or vice versa, depending on your outlook and your upbringing and which park you played your touch football in – the one with the pond in the middle where the geese and the ducks behaved as if they were trained assassins, or the one by the airport where the sound of prop planes coming down drowned out pretty much every threat or declaration of love that might otherwise have altered your life for the better.

*In which his knuckles have turned an off-white due to the exertion that is only a faint memory now. One that also includes library books left on chairs, abandoned by people who suffered awe-inspiring premonitions. Half-starts and torn envelopes. Leaves with no veins in them. She pulls a bottle from the refrigerator, turns the cap and tries unsuccessfully to un-turn it, to replace the preceding time as*

*if it were a floor. She knows the trick is to juggle each moment in both hands, to divide it into squares and label them. But the north wind is complicating matters, as it always does. It is convinced of its own sublimity. Try talking down the self-regard of the inanimate, the impossible to paint! It is like borrowing water from a cistern. There is no end to the work, and what are you supposed to do with the result? Set it aside in what container? He throws pebbles at the window, whether to alert her to his knowledge of her presence or frighten her moderately, she is never sure. Perhaps he is trying to conjure a time when they did such things routinely. When they spoke to one another with objects because objects were always more eloquent than words.*

Longer journeys simply mean more time to sleep between them. And toast some bread and tell jokes we heard along the way. Most of these have to do with human anatomy and remind the listeners of a time when they too were confused about what their bodies were supposed to accomplish, how they differed in some essential way from the other bodies that surrounded them. I sneak in at the side entrance and am immediately overwhelmed by the darkness, not so much as a candle to cut through it, though I suspect there are people in here who possess night vision apparatus of the sort they use in the military. If we know where the ambulance is, we let on like we have never heard of an

ambulance before in our lives. We conduct ourselves like people just in from the jungle who have had to cart their dead away on their own shoulders and so could not pretend the world is more pleasant than it is. Could not congratulate themselves on having conquered something that is even now weighing each and every one of us down from above. And below. Is twisting us about at small, but irreversible angles without our pausing in our pursuits long enough to recognize it. Perhaps this is why we spend so much time in the clutches of other people, why we long to know a stranger's name and what makes that stranger a stranger in the first place, what will make him shudder. The lane we are driving in isn't a lane at all when examined closely, but it still has all the properties one would otherwise expect. A lot of empty space above the pavement. A song quality about it we associate with tuning forks, with days spent at the calliope, taking lessons. Imagining ourselves in the company of whales. When isn't it a good time to reconsider our attachments, to ponder the very formulas that have to this point kept us sane? The woman I'm thinking of borrows fifty dollars from the same person who owes her ten, and they bicker for a while concerning what should happen next, how they will sort out just who is using whom and for what purpose. It's the sort of dialog I have been aping for

decades, trying to find a place for it in my articles, but they don't actually require any speaking. They don't even seem to be saying anything at all. They are like those birds that make their nests in a cliff face and stick their heads out on occasion and emit a single, unvarying note. And each one sounds just like its neighbor, so that you can't imagine what the purpose of that sound is, how they use it to communicate. And maybe that's the point – maybe communication isn't about communicating anything after all, but simply making a noise that might be mistaken for something of importance. Something that plays with its own shadow, that weaves and braids it into previously unknown shapes.

*In which she phones him when she thinks no one is listening, when everyone else in the house has gone out for a meal of crawdads and fried rice and she lets him touch her through the receiver, put his mouth on hers and exhale and before she knows it the sun has taken to lighting places inside her that had never been anything other than black. That had been rumors, really, she was inclined to disbelieve. The light is warm and a little uncomfortable, and she moves away from it as might a paramecium in danger of being overwhelmed by that light, broken and dismembered simply through the act of someone else's looking at it, someone's taking the time to pinpoint the porous borders and the*

*organelles, memorizing those parts so as to pass the knowledge on to others.*

The drums come pre-tuned, reminding the older citizens of those days when the sky was anything but wholesome. It grabbed at your skull with its fingers. Sometimes our reactions don't indicate anything in particular. They don't allow those present to view the inside of the mind, but instead complicate matters, the way our middle names usually come with a story attached. One no one is really all that interested in hearing. And yet we tell it at the slightest provocation. We add the details that make it more than a little upsetting to those who lived it and don't recognize this version. Luckily, they are far away now, in Maine. Dining on lobster. Pursuing friendships that have no real hope of flowering. Why is it, Immanuel wants to know, his fingers tapping nervously at the mahogany, his hair going white before our very eyes, that the end of the world keeps receding and the harder you try to catch up with it, the farther away it gets until you are almost certain there is some form of sorcery involved? That the medicines developed from the roots of certain plants no longer identifiable – or even available on the black market – are tasty and effective all at the same time? While our folk

remedies show up as the punch line of jokes they are even now telling overseas? The others give Immanuel a wide berth when he gets in these moods, these overarching melancholies that try for a while to disguise themselves as everyday curiosity. They pull the surroundings in around them like a vortex and refuse to let go, so that if you are caught in the vicinity, there is a real danger of suffocation, of blanching at the wrong moment and losing your reputation for being cool. Blessed with a sizable mustache. I try to load the snowmobiles back onto the truck where we first spotted them glinting in the moonlight like so many dinosaur eggs, but my back is weak for reasons I can not explicate. Eulalie says our failings are the definition and our triumphs the places where our flesh does not meet itself in the middle, where it is apt to tear and bleed. And she says it from astride a fencepost. Of course, this too is the addition of that which was not part of the original, the re-arranging so as to make it all one's own. But that doesn't make it any less real. If anything, it braces – it solidifies something otherwise too fragile to hold together before the simple movements of the clock. The application of salt grains to the potatoes come dinner, and the subsequent hoisting them eagerly on your fork.

*In which circles can, in fact, be drawn perfectly by hand. But we don't believe the testimony of our senses precisely because that testimony seems so accurate. Who can believe such things as acorns and northeasterly breezes? They are better utilized by liars when those liars have yet to figure out what their ultimate purpose is. Why they keep claiming to have been in the crowd that watched the Hindenburg burn when clearly they are much too young. And the story doesn't add anything of value. It doesn't leave them in a better position to get what they want or even be able, really, to pinpoint what exactly that might be. They are left tongue-tied, but only in the mind.*

By the time we unlearn the alphabet, the rain has begun again in earnest. And by earnest I mean to indicate more than just its demeanor. I mean something close to what you find in the darkest parts of your own mind when the doors down there have been closed and the ladders lifted up by unseen hands. This is the same territory first explored by the mathematician when he decided he would start dispatching strangers with a razor. This decision was quickly improved upon, but the struggle is not one we should underestimate. Or color in with pastel yellows. That razor sits to this day on the mantelpiece, a reminder of why we try so desperately to remember the past at exactly the same time we are unspooling it with our fingers. Can you imagine



a more fitting send-off? The fishing boats line up in two parallel rows, their masts glinting with pieces of aluminum foil nailed to them in lieu of silver dollars, their rigging torn and bloody in places, but soft and inviting in others. Depending on how closely you look. Or what takes place on them before you arrive. I suspect the mathematician is a gifted arm-wrestler, the sort of man who allows you to believe you have the advantage right up to the point when it becomes obvious your tendons are beginning to tear. And what's the use of complaining? You will only be reunited with the contents of a jar. You won't even recognize what's in there because you never really knew what any of it was supposed to look like in the first place. It was kept hidden away and any attempt to catch a glimpse when you were a kid – the way we sometimes try to see the most recent moments burned, in afterimage, onto the backs of our eyelids – met with such swift reprisal, you couldn't help but feel as if you had been singled out, that you were just the sort of unfortunate soul people wrote songs about when they still knew how to write songs. When people still sang songs to one another on the steps of the local post office. And then critiqued them using tips and procedures first suggested by those who otherwise earned their living hauling bricks.

*In which you are in a hurry because it looks as if it might snow. And if it doesn't snow, there is always the chance that it will begin to rain and the rain itself might be almost as cold as the snow. And why would anyone embrace a stranger covered in precipitation, no matter what form it has taken? Why would he even bother to answer the door? Such questions keep you occupied as you trudge along with a few of your most important belongings rolled up in an old coat that had at one time belonged to a man who was very good at playing tennis. Who was so good, in fact, he had to explain to complete strangers, almost every day, why he decided to give the sport up. As if that mattered as much to them as it did to him. And you used to marvel at this, used to wonder what it would be like to be so accomplished at something, other people knew of that accomplishment as if the fact of it had been whispered in their ears.*

A lobster claw sits on top of the bookshelf, the jagged white flesh hanging out the ends and drawing gnats. Is this a commentary on the Mary Karr volume underneath? The Fred Exley? I follow the sense of smell to further points, absconding with jewelry, telling people I know their life stories better than they do without actually being able to differentiate between them based on the color of their eyes or the lines around their mouths. Everyday jingles seem to spread across the surface of the water. Under the cherry

tree, luminaries plan their next outing, their several agendas pushing against one another like little children with shopping carts. Where do the abysmal tendencies stop and the hatpins come in? How does one convince oneself that the batteries contain nothing in the way of sorcery? Of out-and-out discord? Immanuel takes the biography of the painters down, thumbs through it until he can find some suitable parallel to our own inexpressible visions that haunt us on the highway even in the middle of the day. Even with the egg salad sandwiches unwrapped on the seat beside us and the telephone poles streaming by in jump-ropey regiments, single-file. Here's a noise not unlike that you remember, he says, from when you were charged with wringing the necks of the chickens. And you took the obligations to heart, until one of them started speaking to you, and even though you couldn't understand the language, you were certain it was a language, something other than the ordinary squawks and warbles one comes to expect. I shift in my seat uneasily, aware that dredging up someone else's past is actually akin to burying him in sand. With only his eyes and nostrils uncovered. It gets you an hour or two's head start. But eventually someone comes along with a rake. And the sort of empathy one usually finds only in Bollywood movies. Right before the big dance

number. Before the eunuch turns out to be miraculously virile. And possessed of straight teeth. I plan to sneak out before this litany is finished, jump through the closest window if I have to, though a quick glance tells me it is only about as tall and wide as a country ham. And stained and lined all over with lead. Perhaps my bulk and momentum would be sufficient to shatter both window and the frame around it. But why not wait until another option has presented itself? At least wait until the hail has had a chance to intensify and perhaps itself shatter the Saint Jerome depicted there? And, of course, that ubiquitous skull.

*In which something is amiss, but we can't put our fingers on it. Because our fingers don't obey the commands we send them along the nerve fibers. They seem to belong to some unseen force that wishes to humiliate us without actually saying -- or even implying -- anything. It huddles behind the bushes and snickers a lot. But whenever a soul braver than I am tries to flush it out, there is a great commotion -- a sounding of trumpets and a flapping of wings -- and then we are all invited to come witness it again the following week. Inside, the Honduran chef sharpens his knife on a whetstone. He wonders aloud who keeps calling the night "itchy." It is a term not suited for the purpose of accurate description and he objects to it with the sort of rancor one expects of those who hold something sacred and then hear*

*it belittled by a stand-up comedian. Maybe we've been watching too many of those films where the leading man is terribly thin. Suffering, apparently, from an intestinal ailment and apt, for all that, to act as if he has not been consulted about the storyline. About why people keep flailing around on the set as if they are getting paid by the mile. Or the artifact. When I try to find the appendix, the pages are stuck together. Nobody bothered to cut them with so much as a butter knife. And maybe this means we are headed in the wrong direction but will not actually come to regret it. We could regress so far, we might even find ourselves among the speakers of Ugarit – pleased they are willing to share their myths with us, their poems that make such persistent use of parallel structure. And we'll fall asleep at night believing that we too are just weeks away from discovering joy on this fatal, dusty planet. Of putting it into terms that will last even longer than the catalpas that line the street two streets over from our own.*

Whichever sparks arrive are of the wrong sort. They can not be expected to initiate the conflagration because they are too small. They fit on the joint of the index finger and look as if they have been constructed primarily of honey. It's a process we are forced to memorize when we'd rather be waterskiing. Or digging the badgers out of their burrows with a shovel. This is not a consideration, though, for those who have wandered into the vicinity quite by accident. They thought they smelled bacon grease and they were hungry.

Or they couldn't get along with the guidance councilor, who is himself a Baptist. He draws enormous heads on miniscule bodies and claims to be working his way through dental school by selling such concoctions to people waiting for the train. I caught the train once, though, and he was nowhere to be found. Perhaps I should let the technicians explain, but they have their own ideas regarding when the planet will stop its spinning and what will happen to those of us unlucky enough to have remained behind. Not because we have a statement to make, or because the itinerary wasn't made available to all through the internet. Or stapling copies of it to telephone poles. It's just that there is a statement to be made every moment of every day and we wish to be in on the conception and the execution of such things because it makes us feel important. It makes us wonder what people did before the advent of the calendar, before the fermentation of grains.

*In which impressions get made by the tangible reality of the shape that impresses them. That puts its weight behind the impetus and so therefore has the most to gain from the procedure. And, of course, the most to lose. This is why sometimes there is deception involved. Especially a deceiving of the self. Because who else is going to oblige it*

*that way? Who else will put cosmetics on the mirror? Try to picture our surprise, then, when the knocking on the door turns out to be an auditory illusion. Just the sort of thing that makes people begin to question whether anything is ever as it seems. Or at least wonder for the first time in their lives whether such questions might not more properly belong in a locked vault downtown than in the open air where they are apt to get contaminated. By microbes. By ads for brandy. Or, worse yet, swept away on the breezes that are generated by enormous bodies of water lying forever just beyond our horizons. Sometimes the best remedy is to act as if there is no ailment to begin with. To stand in front of objects rolling downhill and act as though they are not actually going to run you over. That is what the centaurs are doing in displays to this day all over the eastern seaboard. Their proud countenances belying the rage they must feel at being jostled by careless children and indifferent curators. People who have no concept of what it means to be obsolete.*

The length of the appendage is unclear but its purpose is obvious. Even those who have yet to glimpse it know that there is something sinister about it. Something almost otherworldly. The ferns shade most of it during the day, and we can use our night vision goggles after that. They come with directions. Good thing, too, as I'm not exactly jealous and I'm not something else either. Maybe we had best

continue with the lecture where we left off yesterday, which was just before the history of the appendage and who wrote that history. Of course, some people claim we are going to hear the iron beams crashing against one another all the way at the end of the river valley, some four miles away. That our every effort to block out that sound using cotton swabs and mandolins will only result in a strange sort of amplification. A turning objects into conduits no matter how ungainly they are shaped. Someone pulls the fire alarm and the whole edifice shudders as though it had been in motion and now it is coming to a halt. The doors to the research labs fly open and when you peer inside there are still more doors and probably more doors inside those, though we have little more than speculation based on *a priori* reasoning to believe this. Eulalie claims the appendage offends her, that she will not even look in its direction so long as it is graced with veins. This seems short-sighted to me and not worthy of comment, so I cross my legs and shift about in the divan and sulk some until she admits she will glance occasionally out of the corner of her eye. But only momentarily and only when everyone else has excused himself from the room and is busy inspecting the kitchen. Of course this leads to mere smudges of color, quick movements and bare outlines, but Eulalie seems



content with such even when you consider those objects that are not the appendage in question. The sewing machines donated to a museum, the earlobes on which she would like to suck. Maybe it's time to just admit she's on to something, to stop hounding her the way we hound our anthropology professors into the grave. With questions that have nothing to do with their areas of specialty, that don't even sound like questions, frankly, but rather bald insinuations dressed up in the aural equivalent of tuxedo and tails.

*In which premonitions come at such great cost, the events they predict shy away from the limelight. They throw raincoats over their shoulders and slink off into the bushes. Perhaps we should follow them. With a baked ham and two pitchers of iced tea. Instead, we listen to those fools who think they will live forever. Who have become so convinced of it, in fact, they have little trouble convincing others. They simply inflect their voices a certain way, and do so subconsciously, just as we drop a register or two whenever something appalls us. And then we begin to understand something that before had been hidden from us, had been tucked away in those drawers where we keep our outdated keys and the menu from the Chinese restaurant: The hours given us ahead of time barely equal those we are forced to steal. They are replaced by symbols that are less efficient,*

*and – let's face it – less satisfying. Less likely to function the way they were intended.*

The suggestion is to try a boat, to head out into the watery void and expect something to wait for you on the other side, an island maybe where the inhabitants have yet to forge any iron. Where they still refer to those who live over the ridge as devils and mimic them by holding two fingers over their heads. I attempt to work out the logistics using a pad of paper sporting the hotel's logo, one where a fish is jumping over a plate with a plum or some other dark-colored fruit on it. Imagine a night spent with your foot in a cast, your ears constantly bombarded by the sound of mosquitoes. Maybe you would find your way out again without having to make use of a candle, without telling the rest of us why your name isn't pronounced the same way it's spelled. Eulalie seems, this evening, even farther away than the imagination can place her, farther than the archipelagos that dot the maps you find sometimes in old boxes, themselves left over from nothing more exotic than estate sales. Maybe that means she will fade with time, that she will become the sort of ill-defined shade that frequents movie scripts, that shows up in your mind when you are no longer awake and then shapes whatever dream state you

are fated to suffer. The others drift away one at a time, wind up prey no doubt to headhunters and obscure spiders with bands on their legs. And I think maybe I am responsible somehow for what has happened. I am the one who first offered them cash for their participation, and I didn't even have sufficient funds to take myself on vacation. But there's no use assigning blame. Particularly if you don't have the sort of memory necessary – one of those originating deep down in the synapses and the nerve fibers on either side of the synapses, and the black spaces that compose the synapses themselves, at least if the elaborate diagrams are to be trusted.

*In which whoever attempts to reconcile what he is doing with why he is doing it will discover a despair lurking at the center of all things. It hunkers down there like a toad. And when you try to wedge it out with a crowbar or just pull it free with your bare hands, it emits a noxious substance that causes visual hallucination. And sometimes the auditory variety if you receive the full dose. This is followed by strong urges to pursue sexual encounters with people you hardly know. As such, it is a substance people pay top dollar for on the black market. There are reports of some unscrupulous dealers passing off counterfeit substances culled from various be-furred and otherwise adorable creatures as the real thing. They will be apprehended eventually. Until then, we can comfort ourselves in the knowledge that the effects*

*attributed to the original have been wildly overstated. They are subject to the same sort of hyperbole and distortion that haunt the villagers who live on the sides of the mountain. You can't get them to smile even when it's their birthday. And people have come from miles around to deliver their speeches. To load them down with gifts. Pastry. Plastic jewels like those you find sometimes in a machine at the front of a department store. And sure! These things never fool even the children they are aimed at. But why spoil the afternoon by letting on you know? Why not just play your saxophone until everyone has had his fill? Perhaps there is a tune in there. Something that has yet to be captured by the geniuses of melody who precede you. The vaudevillians. And the Lester Young's. Before they became Lester Young.*

Prepare your response now. Build on the joy you felt when the soil, crumbled up in your fists, fell through your fingers and onto your feet. And you were singing something that didn't make any sense but it had all the important names in it. Rumpelstiltskin. Ali Baba. Those rivers you cross over when travelling from one state to another and the citizens there have erected bridges, at their own expense, to allow you this convenience. They meet in secret, trying to recall a time when they too were on the move, when they were trying to lose their own shadows because to do so usually resulted in a person's gaining a great deal of prestige where they came from. It meant your story deserved to be on the

lips of those who couldn't read. Eulalie pulls her lighter from her pocket, shakes it in emphasis of the things she says, but no one can hear her from this distance. She points at the ceiling. She points at each of our faces in turn until we wish she would just go ahead and incinerate some paper. I wonder if she is aware her thighs are showing, that they seem to darken the higher up you go, and this is not an effect of the light. Perhaps she is trying to tell us something, trying to indicate bits and pieces of her life without having to resort to words, which never seem to fail her but which never really seem to befriend her either.

*In which, when the ice storms arrive, they seem grandiloquent, almost as if we are to congratulate ourselves on having lived long enough to witness them. Having escaped the falls from great height and the malicious designs of our uncles who got fired from their jobs at the foundry. And wished to amuse themselves in the meantime by shooting firecrackers off just outside our bedroom windows. And wouldn't it be amusing if we grew up without retaining a single memory of these people? If we stowed their images away in something like a steamer trunk and tossed it into whatever served as the inner equivalent of a river? At the aquarium downtown, the coral has yet to be placed in its tank. But there are signs at the entrance to let us know what is coming. And why it is delayed. A perfect stranger gazes intently at the horseshoe crabs, tries to act as if his mind works in irregular patterns and so can't possibly be predicted. We would need weeks just to find the*

*symbols necessary in the books in the library. And even then, they wouldn't entirely suffice.*

You have it in you to accomplish what others deem incomprehensible. The sewing together of two fingers. The translating of one language into another without knowing, really, any words in either one. It's a skill one picks up when one is in school to be something else. A beautician, say, or a herpetologist. When one is considering dropping out because everyone else has already finished. The hallways are deserted. They're not even hallways in the strictest sense of the term. I show up in my stocking feet and have trouble keeping my balance because the light keeps getting in my eyes and when I try to trace it to its source, the sun pops up repeatedly as the most likely culprit. But I refuse to accept this precisely because it is a conclusion drawn from experience and common sense, two of about twelve things on the list of those things I no longer believe in. Or at least I no longer recognize as being important. The way tissue paper is important. The way loving one's neighbors is said to be important, though when is the last time you even spoke to yours? Eulalie cures the blisters, makes them disappear, simply by touching each one for a moment with her right index finger. I suspect she does so at great

detriment to her own health, taking somehow the substance – the poison and the chemical reactions that cause the blisters to rise, if not the outside stimulus that set those reactions going in the first place – into her own body where it is stored in the tissues until such time as there is no more room for it, so much having compounded on itself over the course of the days and the months and the years. And who knows what will happen then because it hasn't happened yet? Or at least I have yet to witness any alteration that can be pinpointed and described quantitatively the way you can describe the overall increase in yield for the wheat crop each season. Or what it means to stand near the ocean after a red tide has rolled in and there are fish carcasses strewn across the sand for miles in either direction.

*In which the levee stretches halfway to Albertson, a town I remember from childhood when we used to invent towns in our conversation. And then endeavor to make them real by drawing them on pieces of paper. I concentrated on the packing district, sure that some day I would quit school and wind up there. Like the uncle I was also forced to invent through the strictness of the rules. Sometimes we acknowledge what we have until that time steadfastly ignored – as if changing direction might allow us to free ourselves from the grip of fear. Or small-mindedness. But*

*there are suits of armor in the hallway and you can't just wish them away. They have to be dealt with in a practical manner. The same as those mummies you saw in a case once in the museum in St. Louis. You kept asking whether they were important personages wrapped up and stowed away for millennia. Even the placards refused to tell the whole story. The cobb salad did not end up causing you the distress you suspected at first it might. But no matter how frequently you expressed this and other fears to the patrons who accompanied you through the hallways, no one seemed to believe a word you said. It's like there are two layers of discourse at all times – one associated with the surface of things where we move about quite comfortably. And another associated with that which is hidden or underneath (depending on your perspective; depending on, for example, your age or your height relative to those who constructed the buildings in the first place). This is, finally, an illusion. Much like that which occurs when warm air gets trapped under a layer of colder air and all sorts of human figures seem to dance around beneath the trees on the horizon.*

The candles line the shelf like soldiers, change the atmosphere of the room by increments until I no longer recognize it. I no longer even wish to be alive. Eulalie says this is typical and warns that she will listen to only three-fourths of a lament before she starts whistling something under her breath. But I know this is just the sort of thing she will not do because she is afraid of hurting other people's



feelings. At least she is known for possessing this quality among those who have never met her, who have only heard rumors while patrolling the taverns downtown where rumors turn up in unheard of numbers. They breed like pestilence and follow their own instincts until there are several different versions vying for the same space, trying to supplant one another using every conceivable device. Including asbestos-lined gloves. And portable washstands. Tickets to the tram that no longer runs. Eulalie speculates out loud that I have spent too much of my time in contemplation, as if there is something wrong with ignoring the houseplants at your elbows, refusing to pick Styrofoam cups off the ground. We get involved at our own peril, and when the mind re-evaluates its surroundings, there is a sense of having accomplished something without ever having to get out of your chair. This is why Eulalie runs her teeth around the outside of my ear whenever she catches me off guard, whenever she has finished whatever it is she does in her studio. She wishes to remind me that my body has made its own declarations and will probably continue to do so despite what I have to say in the matter. In fact, as far as it's concerned, the mind and the mouth attached to it (on occasion) are not members in good standing. They don't have the same rights, aren't allowed to follow the

same essential protocols, as say the ankles, which are completely trustworthy. They know a good thing when they stumble on it. Eulalie blows each candle out one by one as if it were a ceremony and those of us fated to observe it must remain satisfied with the aroma of the smoke that wafts by, that reminds us of times from the past when we too were part of a cult. And those who wished to liberate us seemed dense as mules. They had no pupils through which to see, nor tongue fit for the proper lapping up of the manna.

*In which Eulalie isn't the least bit interested in what we might have seen when we were in another state. Even if that state was known for its arts festivals and its elevated levels of fetal alcohol syndrome. She's certain lethargy has a meaning, that it comes from outside like gamma rays. And ought to be put to good use. Perhaps, she says, there is trouble with the thyroid. She read somewhere it is this particular entity that causes the problem. It sits around shiftless as a minor league baseball player and follows its own council when it is inclined to follow anything at all. We dismiss the idea and try to unbutton her blouse, but our fingers seem unusually thick. And when she decides to do it for us, she pictures the rings of Saturn, imagines what it must feel like to be that far away from where you are actually standing at any given moment.*

All we know is the taste of the clay close by, the way it slides down your throat. The contest requires we abstain from all extra-curricular activity until the contest is over. But no one can tell us when that will be. We try calling the number listed on the pamphlets, but it is missing some digits apparently, as the phone remains silent after we have dialed. Not so much as a busy signal. It's as if we have tunneled into the center of some entity the likes of which we could not have imagined before our acquaintance with it. And it is trying to determine what it will do with us, how it will handle this intrusion by beings it, on the other hand, has stumbled upon on numerous previous occasions. When there was a celebration on the levee and people brought their lawn chairs and their Coca-Cola in bottles. You could hear them half a mile downstream, forgiving themselves out loud to the strumming of banjos. I remember a time when I myself had ceased to exist in any but the most primitive manner – like slow growth fungus on the exterior walls of the pumping station. Maybe I simply invented that state so as to have something to talk about later, when I was invited to dinner by the parents of the woman I loved then, but did not wish to marry. Who knows, maybe it's a false memory planted by someone who knows how to get what he wants simply by saying the name of the thing he

wants over and over again. Eight hundred thousand times, if necessary. And then thanking those who deliver it finally by bending nearly horizontal at the waist. And holding that position until you begin to wonder if maybe the muscles in his back are beginning to spasm.

*In which there are two pen and ink illustrations in the margin. When we try to make it three, someone begins coughing in an exaggerated manner. Maybe he will get assistance from people who aren't convinced what they are doing is ethical. But you have merely to mention the name of a forefather – even one who didn't actually sign anything – to win over the last holdout. It's like we are on top of a glacier and every direction we turn looks different. There are, despite what we have been told to expect, landmarks of all sorts. Changes in grade and temperature, in fauna and susceptibility to echo. You may confirm this by writing scraps of other people's wisdom on pieces of paper you find in your pocket. By looking too long at the woman in line in front of you. She strokes a strange man's face in her mind. But in the actual, physical world, she holds her hands at her sides, intentionally immobilizes them as if they were insects intent on causing innocent bystanders harm.*

I suppose the blood spots on the mattress will be interpreted differently by those who are color blind, but I'm ready to announce some conclusions right away, ready to

get the camera out and take compromising photos before the opportunity has passed and everyone has shriveled up like apples a month after they hit the ground. When the hornets that had come from all corners to get drunk on the pulp have since decided to devote their few remaining days to studying the demeanor of their less excitable cousins. The wood lice. The walking sticks ambling about as if they are in no hurry to get anywhere but are certain there is somewhere they are supposed to be. But how do we determine the names of these locations if we can't even decide the time without referencing one of those devices designed to determine that for us as well? As if we can't be trusted to glance at the sun without being mesmerized, without burning our retinas because we don't know when to turn away? On the outskirts of town, the breeze kicks up and the ice is suddenly full of grains of sand, black sand of the sort one normally associates with beaches on volcanic islands, places where the inhabitants have preserved their culture by burying it underground. By removing every intricately carved mask and feather adorning it from their usual resting places by the hearth or near the window and placing them in storage containers that washed up after an ocean-going barge ran aground on the reef nearby. My companions wander around with their hands stretched out

in front of them, trying to ward off whatever objects threaten to stand in their way and so harm them in a collision. But I find the conditions entirely suitable and continue without respite even as the wind, in its howling, begins to sound like those animals that live only in our imaginations. And yet they nevertheless seem to free themselves on occasion and emerge into the actual world when our digestion isn't working properly. Or when we've been listening too closely to the shamans in the village, listening to their tales of leaving their own bodies so as to travel the world at such great speed, they are frequently mistaken for heavenly objects such as meteorites or comets.

*In which we must stamp our memories on something less flimsy than that part of the brain where almost nothing sticks. Not praise. Not the remembered taste and texture of cotton candy. And just how much surface area are we talking about anyway? Natural history forms the core of the discussion. Though there are incursions occasionally into the worlds of fly fishing and tantric sex. This gets people to thinking about how, as children, they were forever wishing they were older than they actually were. And then they reached a certain age and realized the futility of this approach. By then it was too late. Maybe, at one time, they wished to erect something important. A monument to their*

*having been on this Earth, in this particular neighborhood. Then, gradually, they lost the sensation of having been anywhere at all. They drew pictures on yellow pieces of paper. They nodded a lot in the affirmative, like people who had been kicked in the head by a horse.*

I have to ask the question even if I'm not altogether sure I want an answer, or that an answer is even possible. What would happen if every response were cataloged, put into a book the covers of which sport pictures of ponies and sunsets and people hiding behind the bushes with crossbows in their hands? Maybe the joke gets better when you tell it backwards. When you take the descriptions of the fire hydrant and the hydrangeas out and just leave in the general gist of things, the mood, as it were, that gets depicted using mood-type words. "Vigilante". "Galaxies." The others at the table wrinkle up their noses in unison, and I begin to suspect they have practiced the maneuver more than once. They have gotten together on the weekends when the rest of us were occupied with funerals and state dinners, and they have orchestrated the thing right down to the placement of the eyelid in relation to the bridge of the nose. Excuse me, I all but holler as I jump up from the table and hurry back to my room, planning all the while to get my portable electric Remington out and find my way into the

story that has suggested itself the way someone might suggest sexual relations without actually using any words. Though this part must remain theoretical, as I can't remember the room number or if it even had a number like the rest of them do, starting in the low three hundreds and moving inexorably upward until they dead end in front of the hallway door. I refuse to believe they continue one floor up. But maybe that's just the spleen talking, the vehement denial of logic that has been swelling inside me without my realizing it. Aggravated, no doubt, by the culture at large, which never tires of utilizing corn flakes for its purposes. Or videocassettes depicting, among other things, tractor pulls and tarpon fishing.

*In which nothing can ever truly be set aside because the notion of boundaries is alien to everything but the human mind. It does not reside out there among the crocodiles or the rows of petunias that seem to separate one house from another, but in all actuality blend and stitch together everything around them, like those chemicals that serve as catalysts in experiments of the sort we were required to perform in high school. In an attempt to remember these, she winds a piece of floss around one of her toes. The one he ignores most thoroughly whenever he gets around to touching her feet. That he spots it almost immediately, that he jots something down in the notebook that has the lush*



*green cover on it and which she is always meaning to snoop through if she can ever find the time and the proper mindset, none of this concerns her as much as does his obvious glee now in performing the most routine tasks. The opening up of a can of tuna. The slopping its contents onto a Kaiser roll.*

The impossible must re-assert itself as something ferocious, to be held in great awe as it was in the days of the plagiarist. When everyone was keen to demonstrate his impeccable taste. And then fashion (after, of course, the fashion of others) a response to the pervasive malaise. To whip it up into such a frenzy, the riverboats swung wide to avoid it. And ran aground. They tore enormous holes in their hulls and forced the occupants to run around on deck as if they expected at any moment to witness an allegory without actually knowing what an allegory was. I find myself haunting this neighborhood almost daily. Nodding and looking over people's shoulders even when I long to connect with them in some more meaningful way. Say by inviting them to the lake. By showing them where the walleye hang motionless in the murky water. They wait for something to flash by. To stir their instincts in a primal fashion that we can document but no longer truly take the measure of. We have lost that ability in trade for others

more circumspect and ultimately unnecessary. Fine glossy adornments that cost a great deal. But don't fetch much uptown, where people are busy selling their cucumbers and their squash. And relating tales of things that seem to have happened directly to them. Marvelous, uncanny adventures that almost always conclude with someone mistaking one person for another. Becoming confused about who is in the room. And who has only recently left it so as to train their telescopes on the Pleiades. And where do they come from, exactly? How is it they intrude so consistently, we can't imagine our narratives finding their completion without them? Perhaps this is what it means to be searching for solace in places where none is permitted. Where it has been banished by edict of someone who ought really to be more lenient. The grand executioner. The purveyor of wanton phantasmagoria. Who nevertheless spends his weekends relaxing by the sea.

*In which I read the word "amiss" lengthwise, as if it does not operate the way other words operate. As if it has been injured in a race. And no one wishes to examine his own feet because the eddies and backwaters will cause a sense of vertigo it is hard to get rid of so long as your feet are still attached to your body. So long as they are capable of*

*reminding you of what you see every time you are forced to make your way from the cereal aisle in the grocery store to the steps of the house where someone you were very close to grew up and then met her end in tragic fashion. Immanuel knows, though, that the wheezing is just a symptom and ought to be treated as one, ought, in fact, to be overlooked for hours at a time while the barn owls are still in the barn. You can take photographs of them. You can explain to people later that the name is really supposed to be accidental and that to find the creatures in the structure that gave them their name is a little like getting struck by lightning at exactly the same time the toaster falls into the bathtub with you. And maybe we aren't supposed to breathe a word of this to anyone, but Immanuel knows it's very difficult to breathe almost anything else. Even ordinary oxygen is apt to send us tumbling down the stairs.*

Breadcrumbs accumulate on the pavement, seem to spell out certain words that the language has long since abandoned. These remind us of our attempts to understand texts that elude all understanding. They catch on the ear like mites. I wave the spectators away, thinking maybe I can make things right again by participating in the wider world around me, by admitting other people have something important to say on occasion. Though the evidence seems circumstantial, at best. When was the last time we opened an envelope and found another envelope inside? And

thought to ourselves: These are trying times, to be sure, but they don't seem as despicable, ultimately, as say, the time before the law described by Augustine in his *De Trinitate*, and mentioned originally in the Babylonian Talmud. All of which, perhaps, is designed to impress those in our company who have yet to immerse themselves in such matters. Who don't even seem to recognize their own coats when it's time to leave. They whisper among themselves in the corner, waiting, I suppose, for the opportunity to declare their own beliefs, to point out anachronism and inconsistency. But the time for all that passes and they are left merely with a pair of brass knuckles. A photocopied poem of Blake's. I try reason, I try cajoling, I even try date nut bread but the recipe is flawed in several particulars and the resulting loaf puts everyone in mind of the trip they took once to Cozumel, or the x-rays ordered up after a sharp pain in the side appeared and then disappeared and then re-appeared again in such quick succession, everyone present threw down their dictionaries and stormed out the one exit that also served as the only entrance. You might have thought there was treasure to be had out there, so intense was the rictus, and the bulging of the eyes, though this could be explained as well by any number of horrors we couldn't see. But which we can imagine now and relay to

our audience by means of electronic messages and a certain training in rhetorical flourish. The sort of thing you pick up when you are originally intending only to study to become a paralegal, to make a comfortable income so as to support your family and have enough left over to get a room now and then when you decide to sleep with someone you barely know.

*In which the contents of the envelope remain a secret because no one has looked inside it. Even those of us on the committee, those of us making decisions because decisions have to be made, but there are no admirals in the building. Not to worry. An element of the made-up is expected in the telling of stories. So we will simply fall back on tradition even if it costs us our good names. And a dollar thirty-eight in taxes. Sometimes where you wind up is determined not so much by where you began, but over which mountains you were required to proceed. These mountains might have been fairly young, in geological terms, and so decorated all over with sheer rock faces and un-scalable cliffs. With pine forests hanging on the rocks like toupees. And goats and other alpine creatures keeping a close eye out for intruders. This is why it's usually best to attempt to parachute in, though the parachute itself can get tangled or torn in the packing of it beforehand, and that almost always results in something unpleasant occurring. When you read in the paper about someone who has been found by city workers*

*on the banks of the river or on a flight of stairs, you wonder if it's possible we are misleading ourselves so as to postpone our own destruction. Because how else could you explain it? How else to make sense of our constant shuttling back and forth between houses? And lying half the night in a supine position just because it's supposed to bolster our health? Really, we ought to be doing the opposite of what our instincts tell us. We ought to be throwing ourselves from the tops of the tallest trees, for instance, and seeing how far we might glide.*

Just beneath the initial layer there is another layer composed almost entirely of grit and cast-off paper clips, the occasional fossilized remains or partial remains of creatures we no longer share the surface of the Earth with. This should be a reminder that we must push on, even when confronted with the possibility of our own annihilation. Otherwise, we are apt to think of ourselves as fully realized, as complete beings on par with those that used to hover over our doorframes late at night and when you spoke to them, they tried to speak back but their voices operated on an entirely separate wavelength, so that all communication had to therefore continue by hand. I like to think the meaning of the sentences shines through the way you can tell there is a sun somewhere behind the clouds every morning at around 11 o'clock. The dishes have been

scrubbed clean and are still lying in the bucket and the woodpeckers have commenced banging their heads against the trees that line the clearing. I try to capture the blur of that motion with charcoal, but it doesn't get the job done properly. Colors are involved, reds and ermine whites that remind us, should they reach a certain speed, of our being invited to witness what happens in a bell tower. Funny, the way people seem to believe we can forget anything. That our minds are loaded with trapdoors of the sort that operate on a mechanism like that you see sometimes in old films. Once, I thought I pulled something back from one of these trapdoors. I grabbed it as it was headed down, and I could feel the length of it and the musculature, the tendons straining to get away. Maybe it was a memory like those that gnaw at us when we are sleeping, that chew through the bones one millimeter at a time, until one day we wake up and realize we can no longer function. There is a part of us missing, but this part wasn't always missing. It used to be there, propping us up. Providing sustenance from the inside like stories passed down from one generation to another. Such stories are said to exist the way Greenland sharks are said to exist even though most of us have never actually seen one.

*In which Eulalie refuses to acknowledge any comment directed her way by strangers, friends of friends, detectives. Considers such rudeness a mark of good breeding. She writes about it in her journal, portions of which are published by the town's literary club. This is an organization composed of people (no more than four or five) who like to get together every March in the middle school auditorium and have a festival, complete with guest readers and fried lake trout. And they never tire of congratulating themselves on having discovered undiscovered talent in the region the way you might bring earthworms to the surface not with a shovel, but by the time-honored method of sticking a piece of aluminum pipe in the soil and then hitting it with a hammer two or three hundred times. In response, we post fliers on the light posts, draw attention to ourselves by tap dancing on a balcony overlooking the main thoroughfare. But she knows this is just a way to turn the tables yet again, to get her to implicate herself in three languages, when two would have been quite sufficient. It's always like that – a going overboard. A feeling as if we ought to be doing more than what we've done thus far. A feeling that our lives are no more, really, than planks with holes in them. Gnawed out long ago by insects. Or put there on purpose by someone with an awl.*

When I decide to look at the photo she has provided, I am alone again, the light from the lamp seeming barely able to cut through the gloom even though I have recently replaced the bulb in it with one that boasts wattage above the norm.



I like the way her eyes pinch together more severely in the photo than they do in actual life, the way her skin seems otherworldly, something dreamed up in a movie studio by techs charged with making the object of the camera stand out against an otherwise drab background. I remember the time she lifted her skirt up for me, let me peek from my chair which suddenly felt enormous, like a cavern from which you could never hope to escape. Of course, the real question is whose penis is that in the photo with her and what does she intend to do with it? Thank God for Heraclitus at moments like this! I stuff the photo inside the filing cabinet and throw open my book to a page where Heraclitus claims *souls are exhaled from moist things* and I am back on terra firma again. My own experience tells me that this is true, because why else the shell and why the furor over the spill that made me famous? Or infamous. That got me mentioned in the children's books so that I can't even go to the park anymore without the children stopping what they are doing to point. Some of them are bolder than the others and they shout obscenities as if I had damaged them in some way instead of suffering the damage myself. I run a finger over the seams, the cracks welded together, despite all reports to the contrary, by some natural process I have yet to understand. Perhaps it is

the soul in there, as Heraclitus said, welding the armor together so as to keep itself from exhaling away into nothing, from drifting out of the center and into the sky. I had hoped, of course, to discover something in the act of sabotage, to barter soul for that which stands in direct opposition to it. That which stands away from the body and lets others grab hold. For who wants a soul when the protection of it means you can not give pleasure to others? You can not find your way inside them, except with the hands which are clumsy and too public. They lack the intimacy of the hidden.

*In which, when the scrub grows too close to the property line, we begin to imagine our own boundaries, the skin in particular, threatened from without. But we can't see the danger. And the harder we try to identify it so as to be able to withstand its advances by throwing up a shield, say, by wearing several sweaters at the same time or slathering our bodies in chemicals we mix up in the basement, the more likely it is we will wind up being deceived. We sense features in the landscape that don't seem to be visible. And then we try after the fact to describe them, to lure our unsuspecting guests to their – not doom exactly, but what word would suit? What word would put you in mind of that disappointing climax without giving it too much weight and shade? I maintain there are twenty-four different ways to get lost in this part of the argument, and no sooner have I*

*elaborated on three or four of them – using illustrations borrowed from Anaximander and his Earth as cylindrical column surrounded by air – than I am shouted down by those who arrive late but nevertheless seem to grasp the most intricate details with the same ease and dexterity one encounters sometimes among those who weave baskets for sale to tourists in Belize.*

Several times the wall altered its appearance without any apparent interference from us. We were trying to understand where the building came to a stop and where the street began, but then we realized there might not be a street out there at all. This might have simply been an expectation left over from when we were asleep and dreaming. But then Immanuel pointed out you can't populate your dreams with things that have never existed at all, unless you do so by combining known forms into previously unknown conglomerates. This caused a furious debate as to whether or not a road represents a conglomeration of parts and forms or whether it is the form itself which is later re-combined into larger, more complex, and perhaps more useful entities. Not everyone present, by the way, agreed with the original assertion. Perhaps our dreams are filled sometimes with things that bear no resemblance whatsoever to anything we encounter in our

daily lives, whether it be component parts or wholes, and we simply lose all track of what those things were when we wake up and our minds are forced to utilize the raw materials at hand to make sense of whatever passed through them the night before. This doesn't mean, however, that we can start to imagine ourselves occupying two mutually exclusive domains at exactly the same time, no matter what those on the fringes would like us to believe. It's possible we don't occupy any real domain at all if by domain you mean a place where something happens. Immanuel criticizes this way of thinking on a regular basis, referring to it as my dealings with the devil, but he doesn't believe in the devil. He draws pictures of something that has horns on its head and a bifurcated tail, but when pressed as to the identity of this creature, he simply shrugs his shoulders and says he felt called upon to fill up space, to decorate the shopping bag (or the envelope or the odd hunk of concrete), felt called upon by something that doesn't use words precisely, but doesn't feel as if it can get its message across using odors either. There must be a middle ground, a place where we can meet to exchange information the old fashioned way – namely with the body and, to a lesser extent, the fluids that keep that body from turning into a pile of ashes.

*In which the dolphins strand themselves in groups of five and six, as if they intend to discover something about the surface world through rudimentary mathematics. The same way we do. She considers joining the others in a rescue, running her hands over the skin of the beasts in what is supposed to be a soothing manner, but is really just a naked intrusion. A chance to commit a crime against another. It's the sort of thing she thinks he would relish, but only if he could admit up front that what he was doing was both unnecessary and unpleasant. It is a transgression against the world itself. Then wouldn't he be in his element, wouldn't he be beaming like a parent at the spelling bee! She closes the drapes, pours some rye whiskey in a plastic cup, then thinks better of it. The light will turn her mind into a prism. The Deep Purple on the radio will begin to swim like eels. She wonders what it's like on the other side of the continent, where the ocean isn't expected to disgorge its contents at regular intervals. Where the airplanes lie rusting and useless in the jungle clearings like tin cans. She hears him banging into things in the bedroom, knocking over stacks of clothes, old milk cartons and the candle holders he bought her for Christmas, but looks at suspiciously now as if he thinks perhaps they were a gift from some other man. She can hear the ruckus growing louder outside, the desperation in the voices of the people who always carry desperation around with them in one way or another. Usually it's hidden from view, packed away like a leather jacket with fringes on it. Something embarrassing. Something we burn old photographs to conceal.*

Every time they say the name, someone else repeats it, but that someone seems to be drifting farther and farther away on the current. We swing the spotlight out in larger arcs, but the only things visible are the whitecaps and the spray and every now and then a shadow that seems too enormous to originate with anything living. I sneak below to draw on the oxygen mask that is a faint blue-green and fogs up with every exhalation, reminding me of those days when we would practice on the basketball court until our ribs ached and the birds kept crashing into the windows that were high up on the wall of the gym. Some of these windows tilted outward to let fresh air in and some of them were covered in a layer of grime that seemed as ancient as the language that preceded ours. Maybe we should be locking our valuables in nondescript boxes and then locking those boxes inside something with diamonds on it, but the directions give us no insight into how to follow them. They are not even listed in chronological order. Item number four seems to be missing altogether and fifteen follows closely on the heels of that which tells us to hang up the phone and dial again. All of which suggests we are going to be stuck here for more than a few days. Might as well get used to it, might as well get used to the oddly-shaped insects that seem drawn to the sounds of our voices, to the light above

the table where we like to play cards. Guess that means you are going to disappoint us again, says the woman I've never seen before, the one with the lace panties hanging from her index finger, her other hand on her hip in what she obviously considers a dramatic pose, a haughty way of drawing your attention away from her face at the exact same time you ought to be concentrating on it. To determine the gist of what she's saying with the assistance of what the experts call her non-verbal cues. Of course, they have been studying people like this much longer than I have. They have reams of information they have yet to feed into the computer, all of it stacked up in the metal storage bins that have stickers with the names of local bands on them. These names suggest menace; they remind you it's not always easy to incorporate the whole of Celtic mythology into a single pithy phrase.

*In which you are to imagine you have been granted one wish and you have a week and a half to prioritize your desires. Will your benefactor stick around that long? Will he even remember the contours of your face, that thing that more than anything else – more so even than your name – distinguishes you from all the others who have had tantalizing promises made to them? Whether by supernatural entities or simply those of their acquaintance*

*who believe in supernatural entities. Several decades later, and the process starts all over again. You are sitting on the back balcony, gazing over the river that gives your place of residence that strange, soothing power over the otherwise unruly elements of your soul. And the telephone rings and there is someone on the other end who refuses to identify himself. Who refuses even to acknowledge that he is the one who initiated the call and so has some measure of obligation to inform you of its purpose. To admit, at the very least, he chose you not entirely at random.*

Three minutes later the options seem limited. They seem to have been auctioned off one at a time, though there are no bidders. Everyone stands around looking at each other and then at the back of the room where there is a sound now like someone pulling on the starter cord of a lawnmower. The mechanism, whatever it is, does not catch, and so we are left to wonder if maybe the source is electronic in nature and malfunctioning, if we are being surrounded by creatures that look and act and talk like we do, but which have been selectively bred to disintegrate at precisely the same time we are making a connection. Or at least within the hour. Precision of that sort is not what our nemesis is known for. In fact, he isn't known at all. There are no proclamations, no brochures or websites with his



photograph on them and his list of accomplishments running down the page, bleeding onto the next one like a wounded lizard. No, it's not even clear where the concept originated, though I suspect it has something to do with those years we spent on a sailboat, coming ashore only long enough to re-supply, to remind our hearts of what it is like to pump while we stand perfectly vertical and still. Someone voices his displeasure by making comparisons to the tennis court, the way it divides so nicely in two. And then twice more, though the purpose of these subsequent divisions is never entirely clear even to those who make their living playing the sport. They will tell you any number of things they themselves have heard second and third-hand and so we ought probably to just consider the question not worth asking, at least so long as we are in the company of those who value security and decorum above all other considerations. Who knows how long we'll have to put up a brave front? Maybe later, when the wind has picked up and there are whitecaps on the water and the old women in their yellow bathing suits will have abandoned the shore, we can sneak down to the edge of the water and make a wish and throw a couple hundred pebbles in. And maybe then you'll know why I no longer believe a word you say. Not since I found those messages scrawled across your

bathroom mirror. Detailing where it is you've been and what you've been doing and with whom. All of it spelled out in lipstick. The same type, I believe, I bought you when you said you were out and you had no money. You had spent it all on envelopes and kerosene.

*In which we know what the final pages say. And we know how they wound up at the end. But no matter how vigorously you attempt to wrench this secret from our lips, you won't succeed. Because we have little use anymore for them. We have grown tired of putting petroleum jelly on them day and night to keep the sun from covering them in blisters. Eulalie calls our shiftless approach to naming and calibrating the various elements of our own pasts the Seligmann approach after the celebrated Marxist who claimed historical materialism could no longer be defended. At least by those who diagnose the malfunctions in our car engines. And devise a procedure for eliminating them once and for all. Meaning the malfunctions, of course, and not the engines. Eulalie applauds this change, but I'm convinced that's just to throw her other suitors off. To make them believe that her judgment has been harmed by long association with men who know no better than they what it is she is planning. Why she keeps showing up at people's back doors with a flugelhorn in her hands. And a look in her eyes one might easily mistake for longing.*

The obvious question, then, is what should we do with the fanlight window? How should we make it seem an integral part of the doorway without also compromising our standards? Before this, we faced scrutiny from those who thought our agenda amounted to abolishing all agendas once and for all. And maybe they weren't so far off track as you might suppose. After all, tomato sauce is still clinging to our chins. The phantom limbs are still throbbing. I would like to suggest Eulalie is a distant memory at this point, someone occupying the same mental shelf as the Indians in Faulkner's *Red Leaves*. Or the part of the mountain we scaled when I was a child and I wasn't sure just what state we were in or how long we would remain there. There was a mine in the side of the mountain and I stopped to stare down into its lightless maw until someone – probably my mother who thought I was born simple and never amended that conclusion even after I had graduated from the academy with yellow insignia on my sleeve – someone pulled me by the elbow and whispered that the earth just kept falling away in there forever. And it would like nothing better than to draw me down inside so as to make things less lonely. To liven them up the way you liven up a party by uncorking the champagne. And paying people to remove their clothes. Eulalie bounds about at the periphery

sometimes as if she wants to keep an eye on us. As if we are degraded forms of humanity and ought not to be let loose on the larger world. This is an opinion I happen to share and explains, perhaps, why I am forever whittling at pieces of wood so as to create stakes with which, someday, to build a fence. When I whisper to her at night, there is only the answer provided by someone snoring on the cliff ten yards away, someone speaking in his sleep because he has consumed too much liquor. But I know this is all just a ruse designed to further the distance between us. And so, to counteract it, I tear my surroundings from their canvas and wad them up and stuff them deep inside my pockets, hoping to free up that world where Eulalie resides, the one beyond and behind this one. But all I'm ever able to reveal is an absence of all substantial things, a void much like that said to reside at the heart of the atom.

*In which the structure they settle on is something like an elongated cone. The kind you might see on occasion in astronomy books. The fascination stems from a word-of-mouth mythology that begins when they are children even younger than they are today. A game played with pointing fingers. A lot of flopping around on the grass, like catfish drawn from the pond on stringers. Who, then, will fill in the blank places on the certificates? Who will walk up to the*

*window and tap at it gallantly while everyone else hangs back in the cold and the steam? It's as if they are afraid they will be recognized by those who spend their days and nights pouring over old photographs in hopes of discovering something they had missed the first time through. When they experienced the event directly. When the trains were just trains and yet to have banners hung from their sides by people who obviously hadn't learned how to spell certain words. Like "peninsula" and "animosity." I know there are better ways of belonging, better ways of making one's presence known. But who will embrace them if the sky itself reveals such depths as can only be imagined with the help of other people's memoirs?*

The scorpions enact their primordial battles in Styrofoam cups and we blow on our fingers to keep them warm. As if the morning knows no other way to implement its decisions. On the other side of the valley, birds are circling something that has met its end, but the scene is neither melancholy nor foreboding. We have twenty minutes. Sometimes the measurements don't convey a true sense of the dimensions, the overarching awe one expects to encounter. Our instruments are chrome-plated and very expensive but we treat them, for all that, as if they had been salvaged from the trash heap. As if our consciences have become so powerful, they produce a humming noise inside the skull. And when we try to sleep at night the noise

infiltrates our dreams, creating shifting, vaguely menacing apparitions, that on closer examination turn out to be memories of events that never occurred. Or at least we weren't in the vicinity when they did. We only heard about them later. Over toast and jam, a volume of Ai in our hands. I wonder if it's time to admit I don't feel the same connection, the same deep-seated pleasure at contemplating Eulalie's elbows, say, as I used to. Her eye tooth sticking out at a slight angle. Should we always pursue that which has stopped inviting pursuit? Should we recognize the limits to our own desires even at the risk of eliminating desire altogether? Immanuel sleeps on a large stone, the flies and the heat of the direct sunlight on his face failing to stir him from that slumber intensified by whatever pills he happened to have in his pocket and which he tossed down his throat the night before. I think sometimes Immanuel will die before he ever learns to open his eyes, before he lives up to his name and brings us good fortune. Is it possible to know one thing and then spend your entire life trying to demonstrate that one thing is false? My feet look as if they have been chewed on by insects, the tops of them and the places between the toes ragged and pomegranate-red, the sensation of flame marching up to the ankles and into the legs where it will lodge a while like

a hermit. Where it will, no doubt, begin to utter certain cryptic phrases.

*In which we discover our arms don't matter much. That they might as well be flippers. We don't mind repeating ourselves, though, reassuring others that what we see in the glossy portions of their eyeballs is not just some curved version of ourselves. Rather, we find a kind of algorithm there, an attempt to solve even the most nuanced puzzle with a bare minimum of chatter -- a summing up by cutting down.*

The message arrives via pigeon. I am reluctant to look because I had not been expecting a message. Still, communication of any sort reminds us of being alive and so, we accept whatever is offered. Otherwise, we would be trapped at the end of a long hallway, the lights all but extinguished, the sun merely a rumor that has yet to be verified. I follow the directions until I am close to the object in question, but I can't determine what it is exactly, why I smell citrus. The outside of it is a metallic blue, but when you press your fingers to it, it gives. Like cotton. Or what we imagine cotton must feel like after years of being deprived. Housed in a camp where every morning someone gets on the intercom and whistles a tune, something very like

“Dixie” without all the unpleasant connotations and overtones. People jockey for the best place to listen. They overturn the picnic tables, they fire off muskets left over from some re-enactment. And their shoes keep showing up on our front stoops, caked in mud and dried viscera, attracting geckos from a mile away. I imagine vengeance tastes like lemons, that once you get it in your throat, you want to keep it there. You don’t want it ever to go away. And then there are days when you just wish everything was back the way it was before, that you hadn’t learned anything by eavesdropping. By decoding the secret code. I tell those gathered at the trough secrets come undone if you simply snap your fingers a certain way, if you imagine the contents of someone else’s mind and then you stir it around a little with your fingers. Patterns appear just as they did when someone placed a piece of construction paper and a jar of blue paint in front of you on the desk when you were a child and you felt odd, even then, letting go, letting others observe what it was you created. Maybe they would think you obscene, something unnatural in its desires. They would see what it was you had tried so hard to hide from the world by tamping it down with the mental equivalent of tongs from the fireplace. By whispering its name over and over again until the name sounded like



something a lunatic might say when he thinks he is uttering completely coherent sentences.

*In which what passes for rejuvenation takes place when no one is looking. Out of view, as it were, the kind of thing that worries even the epidemiologists. They know, at any given moment, someone has wiped his hands on a hand towel and inadvertently gotten a process rolling that will not stop of its own accord. How often do we consider in others a vice that thing which we ourselves practice with the utmost devotion, convinced that we will be rewarded somehow by those who have been paying attention? The time hasn't changed. Nothing has moved and there is no shadow that seems to be concealing anything. In fact, there are no shadows at all, only barely perceptible lines between the stove, say, and that place where the stove is supposed to fit neatly against the wall. Where the electricity comes and goes through hidden wires.*

We consider our visions garbage of the mind. It's only natural. Even the beach has industrial or medical waste on it occasionally. But there was a time when these things actually happened. When our lives were touched by something that no longer exists, when they were overshadowed by the equivalent of griffins. Objects filed away as anomalies by those who did filing part-time and

otherwise spent their afternoons lounging in their bare feet, the place above their heels chapped and turning chalk-white, their conversations centering around who is the least desirable mate among a stable that includes cellists. And mouth breathers. And those who roll the flesh of their earlobes between their fingers to such an excessive degree it is commented on by no less a figure than the VP of finance, who, just the same, never manages to curb anyone's bad habits. I light a match and search for a corner that looks promising, that will catch the flame and deliver it to its neighbors and cause the sort of conflagration that some people believe will lead to emotional reunions in the courtyard. Don't believe me? Just read one of those bestsellers they hawk at the airport. With the covers so intricately patterned, you can't be sure what the words on them actually say. Or if in fact there are any words. Inside the covers, people are forever discovering their love for one another though accidents that involve falling down wells or having the fuselage of an airplane crack open and spill its contents into the wide, endless gray sky. Fortunately, there are parachutes and soft landings. Future lives to be drawn upon and memories so much more acute than our own (because, I suppose, ours have yet to be exercised as fully as those that have belonged to more than one person), we

begin to suspect they are not memories at all, but inventions. Things conjured out of thin air for the sole purpose of demonstrating what is possible. And what is merely convenient. And why the one looks so much like the other when you are in the arms of someone who resembles your long-cherished image of Adam, say. Or Eve. And who therefore makes you think of the beginning of time. But also of the end of time because the clocks stop. And the sounds from the street outside have ceased to intrude themselves and they are replaced by a sound you take many minutes, maybe even a couple of hours, to sort out and realize is the sound of your own breathing.

*In which you get through the parts the commentators consider maudlin, then make your journey southward. There you can expect the snow to let up and the people to come out of their houses and wave their handkerchiefs in the air even if they don't know why they are doing so. It is a custom that must be followed regardless of consequence. If Eulalie had presented herself to me then in the form of some other person, had adopted the robes of history itself, I might have saved some money. As it is, she is walking on a wire above the pavement. Perhaps if I fell in love ... Several weeks pass, during which time I write impassioned letters, confessions really, to people I know living in halfway houses. And others who have come and gone like those starter teeth we are equipped with as children without our having to request*

*them. Eulalie considers my love suspect and all but accuses me of making it up. She thinks we are no longer required to believe what people claim even if what they claim is corroborated by the evidence, by the photographs and the visible scar tissue.*

We stand at the end of the road, considering the view and discussing why there are beams of light erupting from what looks like solid ground twenty yards ahead. It is a discussion we have had previously, in other lives, lives with abrupt and frequently painful ends, and reminding us all these years later that it is better to pretend you are living than to actually be alive. No matter what the magazines might say. And the people who read the magazines because they are waiting for someone to tell them they are beautiful. Even if only on the inside. Where, of course, the pancreas is. I suppose the route is familiar to those who have studied the syllables in the national anthems of the various nations (at least those nations that have national anthems) – number and location and silence between syllables, some of those silences lasting so long you could get lost inside them much the same way you can get lost inside a cave. Immanuel dresses in a camouflage suit he purchased for twenty dollars from a store that has no sign on it, a clandestine place you have to know about through word of mouth or

because you stumbled on it when you were looking for a store that sells tapioca. His suit is not colored, as is the norm, to look like a tangle of bushes or a pile of leaves, but a bright orange, with green tints, and all of it in the form of strands of fabric hanging from every point of the body. It reminds one of those beasts said to frequent the banks of rivers and the unexplored swamps on their fringes, the man-beasts and half-apes and even sometimes reptilian creatures that stand on two legs and abduct human infants when given the chance. When the occupants of the cabin they choose to plunder have left their windows unlocked. Through carelessness or active disregard of the advice given them by those who have lived in the vicinity for generations. Immanuel himself suggests the plan is one we ought to have left in our back pockets because now we find ourselves pretending to be more ferocious than we actually are, all the while stumbling about on roads that don't seem to be going anywhere in particular. They wind through the mountains and dead-end suddenly at bodies of water so pristine in appearance, you might be forgiven for bending down at the edge of them and taking a drink. But the consequences, as almost always happens, turn out to be severe. They fairly strangle you with their codicils, with their

phrases taken, at some point in the not too distant past, from the Latin.

*In which the options are similar to those faced by a man who must scale the side of a mountain with his bare hands. He has at least those to work with. And he is familiar with them. He has been using them all his life. To open envelopes. To touch his wife when she will allow it. It's like when we chase down those scraps of paper that refuse to move much beyond the places where they originally came to rest. Where parts of the Earth stick up slightly and catch whatever is attempting to move past on what amounts to imperceptible hooks. Though the existence of such places has never actually been established. Just hypothesized by those whose job it is to keep us from becoming too comfortable in our vests and our explanations. Our alibis and matchbook collections. And isn't this typical as well of our assistants from the Upper Peninsula? We suspect they have been penning their own version of events on the side while feeding us misinformation so that our version will not be as marketable as theirs. They came to us, in fact, with a reputation for getting on people's nerves precisely because they couldn't keep their opinions to themselves and they couldn't quite hide the fact that these weren't their actual opinions. They were planting them for later use the way you plant asparagus a year before it's ready to harvest. But who knows? Maybe we've spent too much time trying to picture all things as layered when, in fact, they exist almost completely at the surface. They wriggle about there until*

*such time as the sun gets high enough in the sky to dry them up. To turn them into little more than desiccated remnants.*

Disappointment admits itself through the side door, with the frosted glass and the long scratches in the wood still evident from the last time. The claw marks. The bell shapes that remind you of practicing the trumpet when you were in middle school and didn't even own a trumpet. You liked to hold your hand to your lips and move your head about as if there was water inside it and you were trying to get it to drain out either ear. We are looking for something with gills on it, something that has crawled up out of the creek nearby and is likely to remain silent even when you roast it over a fire. Not that transcendence is out of the question. It's just that we don't believe anymore in those myths that allow one thing to become another without the imbibing of magical liquors. Or saying words that have a very specific meaning in the language you are using and quite another in a language you didn't even realize exists. Maybe it's time we admit there are too many of us on this trip, our numbers overwhelming the capacity for each member of the group to judge for himself what is vital and what merely an illusion dressed up as certainty. Wearing a wig. Fiddling with earrings. When I address them come midnight, the council

fire sputtering due to someone's having spilled his milk on it, they erupt in something that looks so much like outrage, I have to check my little book of illustrations just to make sure I'm not seeing things. The discussion is not one we wish to repeat, but we find ourselves repeating parts of it anyway for more than a month. Not that this alleviates any of the suffering we otherwise endure in silence. Or near silence, our complaints about the angle of the sun and the bitter taste of the local oysters giving our true positions away the way we give nickels away sometimes to children we think might be able to give us some valuable information. Like where is the clean drinking water? And why are most of the adults in the area missing fingers?

*In which we are always just a step behind everyone else. Perhaps it is this that keeps us from pulling our own tongues out in frustration. Or trying to and finding that the tongue is slippery. And dislodging it forcefully even more unpleasant than we might have imagined. Still, the threats sound less than ominous. They seem almost to seek a melody like birds that haven't been brought up by their relatives. There's only so far instinct can take you before it becomes the wrong direction. We are certain, for instance, money will morph of its own accord. Of course, the exact nature of this change has yet to be determined. We find ourselves on the sidewalk surrounded by people we don't know, people who don't care*



*who we have courted in the past or where we have courted them or why. Though they are interested occasionally in examining our shoes.*

You recognize the ploy. The captions rendered in such miniscule print, you can't help but ask if maybe their author is trying to hide something, is trying to keep the rest of us from figuring out he is making things up as he goes. Like those bits about the slaughterhouse and what happens when you find yourself possessed of one, the gift of someone in his will, and you'd like to decline but maybe there is a fortune to be made there if you play your cards right and you don't get too squeamish. Which is a fault you've noticed frequently in others but have never been too quick to diagnose in yourself. The pattern is familiar to all those who landed on this side of the continent. With parachutes. And notes in their front shirt pockets, notes from old girlfriends who went on to marry diplomats in foreign lands and don't have the time anymore to answer their phones. They hire people to do that for them. Then fire them again almost immediately because they discover a personality flaw, something that had been hiding in plain sight – a tendency to imagine everyone they meet as potential victims of practical jokes. Or whistleblowers. Or

stage performers who can't remember which town in the Midwest they got their start in. Maybe we are all biding our time until something better comes along. And when nothing comes along at all, when the whole Earth seems to stand still suddenly like a statue which is itself holding a replica of the Earth on its shoulders, we realize we should have been more proactive. We should have bounded from one place to another as if our feet were made of springs. And then everything would have been different! We might have been named regional supervisor. We might have been invited as teenagers to those parties where the boys and the girls paired off and slipped into the woods so as to be able to hold one another awkwardly. All while standing up, mind you, as the ground was wet. And said to be crawling with microbes and fungi that could damage the skin.

*In which we read a chronicle concerning someone who opened his eyes momentarily. He described what he saw using idiomatic expressions not familiar even to the native speakers. It's as if he wished to confound the very people who could have been expected to assist him most. With a nod of the head. With checks written for modest amounts. This leads to yet further misunderstandings, and before you know it, we are sitting at the side of the road, our knees up, our hands in the sand, and the bus approaching from the west where it brings with it inclement weather. Dust storms and thunder and hail, the sound of it all, the echoes,*

*bouncing off the water tower and telling a tale it would take us seventeen years of close study to even begin to understand.*

Underneath the layers of soot and the torn garbage bags, underneath the pylons and the pieces of pylon and the bone fragments and the cut up credit cards, you find another layer of pretty much the same thing, only it has been sifted and labeled, and you wonder how someone got here before you did and accomplished so much and then endeavored to hide it all by imitating chaos. Are we still outside the perimeter? Are we still circling like a pack of wolves? The answer to every question presupposes that question, and when you eliminate the question, you don't eliminate the answer. You just make it unnecessary. You turn it loose on a world already so stuffed full of entities just like it, you can't help but wonder if it will survive. We steal fifteen dollars from a solitary man on the road, and begin arguing immediately about how the funds should be used. There is a point at which you start to wonder if your calling on this planet is not so much a calling at all but a contract, the exact stipulations and wording of which have yet to be hammered out. The locals we run into not long afterward don't seem overly concerned with the niceties of formal logic or mapmaking. They don't even seem worried that we might

be armed. Immanuel says we should inform them of what they might not realize simply by observing us – that there are ways to protect yourself from whatever enemy happens along. I have no confidence, though, that we can make ourselves understood using hand signals and drawing diagrams in the loose earth. Maybe we will sleep better when we realize sleep is just the mirror, not of death, as the poets would have it (at least those who are still concerned with such matters) but of everyday waking life. I mean, when was the last time you observed objects in your dreams that didn't somehow correspond to those you encounter on a daily basis? Like end tables. Or boulders with bloody handprints on them?

*In which he remembers a time when he did not know her name, when it was possible that he might never make her acquaintance. And the sensation he gets then is like a plate of enchiladas – something close to burning without the unpleasant side effects. The altering of the flesh in hard-to-repair ways. The making one deathly afraid of both light bulbs and the Fourth of July. This sensation is one that he is sure others have experienced as well. With the cause and consequence still lingering in the air. Maybe there are places where we fit because of body shape and instincts, because of how it is we learned to speak. With certain idioms coming effortlessly as breath. Prejudices lurking just beneath the*

*surface where they are apt to cast shadows in every direction. And get us interrogated. She wishes he'd whisper in her ear, say something he has said a thousand times before. How the flesh is a mass of properties, how it stands between us and the moon. When he does speak, however, his voice is loud, unruly. And aimed in the direction of the walls or the headboard. Objects he deems unlikely to respond.*

The tunnel is not the sort of thing I would normally approve of. In fact, I doubt I would even recognize one without an accompanying sign, a plaque or other legend created by committee. I imagine the shelves are lined with something more important than simple food stuffs, and that odor that permeates the place is one coming from the very bowels of the Earth itself, though by this I don't mean to imply the odor is necessarily unpleasant. How frequently do we try to worm our way into the confidence of those we have only recently met and probably won't ever again be given the chance to talk to because they belong to an entirely different world than ours? They make extensive use of bamboo rafts, say, and we have yet to drift around on anything for more than an hour or two. Which is not to suggest there is a ranking here, an above and below and an obvious means of determining who belongs to which level.

It's just that we approach our other everyday endeavors the same way we approach love, which is to say through dishonest and ultimately obsessive means. Much like those exotic creatures you see on safari once you have saved up enough money to go on safari. By giving up on alcohol, say, or treating the garden with inexpensive pesticides. Alternatives based on junk science, on internal rhyme. Eulalie doesn't like this talk of abandoning one thing so as to secure another. She believes all things are within reach so long as you keep your arms covered and you don't spring any last minute surprises. You know the kind, she says, her mouth turned slightly sideways by the force of her good humor, of that abiding sense of irony she inherited from people who (you can't help but imagine) used to farm with their bare hands, who saw comets streak across the morning sky and still managed to act as if they were alone in the universe. This at a time when no one believed in anything, when they had abandoned every sort of myth that didn't somehow generate itself from the sand and soil beneath their villages or, of course, their shabby farmhouses, where they returned in the evenings and soaked their feet and fingers in buckets full of warm water. They embraced only those myths that abandoned every message and moral in exchange for a certain delicious

sound and feel to it like that you get sometimes when you are biting into the raw flesh of an apple.

*In which, hunkered down in the underbrush, we whistle to one another over a distance of about fifty yards, each trying to outdo the other by mimicking as closely as possible the song of the mourning dove that makes that particular stretch of forest home. The problem arises from the fact that we haven't done our homework, we haven't bothered to listen to the recordings made in the 30's by those who took their work more seriously, apparently, than we take ours. I suspect there are hard feelings. Who wouldn't wonder, in fact, if the entire neighborhood is simply on loan? And those who expect its return, with interest, have their eyes on our rucksacks. They think we have hidden away the best portions in there, the meat and the gristle, and they will receive merely bones. Or wheelbarrows full of something that looks like bones, but turns out on closer inspection to be plaster replicas of the sort they have been known to fashion on film sets when the plot calls for gruesome discoveries. Imagine panic giving way to curiosity yet again, the samples becoming the core experience, that thing that makes people sell their houses and hitchhike to Santa Fe, only to find there objects nearly identical to those they left at home in cardboard boxes.*

The ankles give way almost immediately. They are designed to make you feel as if you are supported somehow from

below. But in reality, you just feel things when you should be thinking and vice versa. When someone asks you about the situation, you hold up a salad fork and say, this is not what it appears to be. Nor is it an illusion. The horse belongs to someone who lives in the next county and he visits it on occasion, during which visits the horse tries to act aloof. It's a strategy that wins the animal praise from those who gather at the fences and jot down figures in their notepads. They cut themselves sometimes on pieces of broken glass, but they act as if they have never yet been surprised by anything. As if the horizon is something held in place by a crane. I doubt there are any theories sufficient to explain Eulalie's behavior, nothing in the research of those who watch others from far away using telescopes. I think maybe I am just destined to imagine all sorts of misdeeds without ever being able to verify them with my own eyes. Of course, I could interrogate her if she would sit still long enough for the interrogation. But she has places to be. This is why she wears the aviator's goggles. Why she keeps turning up in the newspaper, her name misspelled and her photograph the same one they have kept on file for years now. Ever since it became obvious the artists' likenesses they were in the habit of using before that were of poor quality and suggested a certain wild fury, an indecent set to the jaw, an



expression so clouded over as to make people think they weren't looking at a human being at all, but a primitive forebear, a mythical creature of the sort said to haunt still the forests and lagoons east of our present location.

*In which the porch has scorpions on it even though Easter is still a month away. We try hurrying them elsewhere. With soothing words and lullabies and other scraps of information we have picked up while moving through space so rapidly the eye itself is incapable of determining where one part of the world ends and another begins. Our memories concentrate on the grotesque and the exotic so thoroughly, we are left wondering if the past has become something we can not recognize. Aren't we going to take the advice of the experts? a woman inquires of the man sitting next to her on the bus, a man who looks as if he has just finished running a dozen wind sprints, his hair sticking out in every direction like porcupine quills and his mouth shaped into a semi-permanent omega. Aren't we going to pay attention to the sins of Ixion? The answer is a determined no, as is made evident by the sound of people nearby muttering threats under their breath. If, that is, they mutter anything at all. Most of them are too busy chewing on the ends of their fingers.*

Just upstream from the grown-over fuselage is another grown-over fuselage. This time with no conspicuous

markings on the outside. We hover around trying to convince ourselves what we are seeing has its antecedents in the way history has played itself out in these remote corners of the world, but our reasoning takes such drastic tacks and corners, no one is convinced. We begin to wonder if maybe there is no such thing as history at all. Part of the afternoon's meal is left out to attract insects that are themselves quickly shut up in containers in preparation for shipment back to our original point of origin, this step having been insisted upon by those who agreed to underwrite our adventure and who seem to think enzymes are the most valuable substance on Earth. Especially when they are previously unknown. Or when the description was written out longhand and contained adjectives that we might consider questionable. There is even mention of "defenestration", and when some of us voice our objections we are drowned out almost immediately by the sound of the rain. And the leaves turning over on themselves so as to reflect whatever light has made it through the clouds back up into the sky and away from where we so desperately need it. Maybe I've seen enough of the world without Eulalie in it, and if only she would stay in one place long enough for us to catch up, to be able to get a snapshot, say, from a hundred yards away, then I could happily spend my

old age back home, amid the vines and the broken windows, surrounded by children and grandchildren that have no verifiable biological connection to me at all. I could count to whatever number I wished without having to worry about someone correcting me when I got off target, when I started going backwards or when the numbers became so enormous, they had to be given names belonging to everyday objects. Like “Orange”. And “Tuxedo”. Of course, all such longing must be chalked up now to hallucination. Just the sort of thing that convinces you, if you hang around in the forest long enough, that you will be adopted by snakes.

*In which preparation might include drilling through hundreds of yards of clay and sandstone. But no one knows what kind of equipment is necessary. They have heard there is something elongated involved, and possibly titanium, though where exactly they heard this they can't be sure. Probably it snuck up on them while they were sleeping. It rode radio waves in through the window. Once, when I was in the canopy and something similar happened, when the wind and the rain turned it into something like a ghost town, I decided to take a stand, to object on principle, even though the bark of the trees could be expected to give way at any moment. It shredded beneath the slightest pressure and the only thing keeping me from plummeting to certain death was the elaborate safety equipment I had installed*

*beforehand. It's an experience I, for one, will never forget. Mostly because I have been blessed with a photographic memory. Though "blessed" is probably not the right word because that sort of memory is something that will keep you up nights if you're not careful. If you don't unplug it once in a while. Or, at the very least, send it out to search on its own for meaningful lacunae, for those gaps in the past that might otherwise seem invented.*

Immanuel is the first one inside and he makes no sound for fifteen minutes or more, so that some of the more timid members of our expedition fear he has been consumed. Strange how this fear never leaves one, even when one has spent an entire lifetime away from anything with teeth. At boarding schools. Skiing down mountains. Perhaps it is the jungle that re-ignites fears that have lain dormant in us like eggs, and it does so for no particular purpose. It simply likes to get inside the head, to re-arrange things the way we re-arrange our schedules so as to demonstrate our mastery over something that might otherwise seem to be in charge. And more than a little capricious. Eventually Immanuel taps a signal we take, for some reason, to be the all clear. It has a regular rhythm to it and is punctuated by taps at higher volume and insistency than the others. Still, if we were to examine among ourselves other possible interpretations

for the meaning of these sounds, I have little doubt we would come to some sort of consensus. Maybe even be able to bolster our claims finally with evidence, with analysis and explication we pull from the recesses of our minds like old shoes at the end of a fishing line.

*In which she hangs a hand-painted sign on the front door with the expectation that it will serve somehow as a charm, a way of warding off the evil that is part and parcel of the world, that is stitched into its fabric the way misers stitch money into the lining of their clothes. And if this means he too will find a reason to avoid it, to walk the other way when the street suddenly fills up with snow, that's just to be expected. One of those things you know will happen without ever having to put it into words – like the sound meat makes on the skillet. Or the near total lack of interest generated in a book when the cover features a photograph of snails making their way haphazardly across the surface of a map.*

Only the bones remain. They are in a pile in what appears to be a seat. What was once the control console is now a writhing mass of chickweed and bumblebees. Of lizards scurrying about on their identical errands. Immanuel has discovered a chess board somewhere inside and has brought it forward and placed it between these bones and the bones of someone else and he is encouraging a game. I

feel tight in the throat and ask the man closest to me to explain the strange marks on the back of the seat, the hieroglyphics that adorn the walls in places as if they had been scrawled there recently with a piece of charcoal. There are men with walrus heads and women with ordinary heads and the two seem to congregate suspiciously close together as if they are seriously considering what we think they are considering. The man is a specialist in archaic languages and we brought him along as a special favor to his aunt, who used to rub my temples when I was a child and I lost my temper. She was so beautiful then I thought perhaps I was in love with her and I would draw pictures of her on the back of actual photographs of the woman, photographs I had stolen from the family albums they used to keep in a shed. My renderings of her exquisite chin were much more accurate than anything a mechanical device could capture and I think it was this part of her in particular that kept me up at night, that made me want to touch it. The specialist says there are people who live close by who treat all things that fall from the sky as omens and whenever an omen is identified, the whole village runs to observe it. They sharpen their sticks and crowd around the omen and urge it to go back where it came from. Immanuel has no sooner announced both a checkmate and his desire

to see such people than they show up as if on cue. There are three or four of them with duck feathers tucked in above their ears like pencils and their eyes such a deep shade of gray, I have trouble determining at first where those eyes reside in the geometry of their heads.

*In which he has been practicing an extended speech on the topic of certainty, with potions turning back on themselves like bloodhounds and rhetorical flourishes stolen from Cicero. But now that he is faced with a situation that invites the unfurling of this masterpiece, all but demands it in fact, he feels strangely self-conscious, like one of those people who, when grown, still only reach to the shoulders of those around them. Who become convinced that their lack of stature is some sort of curse placed on the family from way back, when there were such things as curses and they were able to accomplish what they were purported to accomplish. Of course, the proof often rested a millennium away. Even then, who could say for certain that the cause didn't exist somewhere closer on the timeline? Like where the mother of the person in question decided to start smoking. Or when the father spent too much time in the sauna. Talking to people he didn't actually know. Bragging about accomplishments even the most gullible must have recognized immediately were exaggerations. In the meantime, the damage was done. There is no reversing stern judgment on our origins, especially when such judgment lies outside our bodies, and before our time. It*

*escapes, in other words, our sphere of influence – which is, of course, never very significant to begin with.*

Three miles from the outpost, Immanuel seems to have suffered a stroke. Perfect enunciation isn't always required, but still, we'd like to know what the center of the universe sounds like once you witness it. What it will bring to our deliberations and how we will refer to one another once our own names become superfluous. He lies in the scrub cover for an hour or two until a detachment of soldiers happens by with a cot and a satellite phone, but even then, there occurs the sort of comedy of errors you ordinarily witness on stage. Maybe we remember everything backwards, the furthest details coming back to us in a haze because the mind has not figured out a way to capture them at precisely the same time they are making their initial impressions. This would explain why the soldiers all look at us as if we have been born at the side of the road and know no more about the earth than does a caterpillar, say, busily winding its way up and down the same single stalk of the same single flower. Too much recognition, though, creates a situation where you can't trust your own instincts. You throw them out because they begin to look like something torn and battered, something passed down from generation to



generation until the original owner is a complete mystery. The sort of person other people – ordinary people – might consider embarrassing. Someone convinced the world is made of foil, that the sun circles it on its way to bigger and better things. Suddenly, I picture Eulalie standing over us, her left leg planted firmly in the ditch, her right foot atop a boulder, and her abdomen disappearing into the clouds. And whenever we try to capture her voice from this place on the ground, we mistake it for other things. The rumble of cargo trucks. The sound of the waterfall when there is no one in the vicinity to turn those sound waves into the representation of something moving, something trying to find its way finally to lower ground. Wouldn't we disown gravity, then, wouldn't we begin to wonder if perhaps everything that happens does so because it has no other choice? Because gravity doesn't allow things to figure out where they are and what they want before it acts on them and turns them into just so many objects with mass and shape and limits and other fairly unimportant qualities of the sort a book or your body might have, even an ordinary rock?



*Albumen* (PressRappel, 2014)

Series One

Iron bars cross the window at regular vertical intervals. Someone has decided to keep me out, has spent a great deal of time fabricating this mediocre defense. The moon stands on the far side of the world and doesn't seem overly anxious to make its journey skyward, illustrating without of course meaning to a concept I have held dear since the day I tumbled from whatever womb housed me originally. Don't confuse my volubility, though, with a desire to reveal secrets that might promise to alter the course of history much the way monsoons have the habit of altering the course of rivers. Which is to say only occasionally, and with terrible consequences for those who inhabit the banks. Remember when the desire to make love was the primary driving force of society, and the more we inhibited it the taller the buildings became? I used to stand for hours at a time waiting to see if anything was going to change, if my daemon was going to show up like the one that belonged to Socrates used to, with wisdom and puns not altogether comprehensible to those he later shared them with.

Sometimes women do me favors that I can't immediately return because of my odd physiology, but when the time comes I can, you can bet your hard-won fortune that I will stop hiding behind the pin oak trees that line the far end of the property and start speaking in tongues. Which is the same thing as speaking in regular syllables and signifiers, I suppose, except the sound of it has been altered slightly by the advent of some mystery we can't quite get our minds around because our minds aren't that pliable. After a minute or two, I try again, hammering at the shutters with my fists, but the vibrations run both ways and the night becomes synonymous with pain even though I imagined beforehand the passing of violets from one hand to another, the whispering of obscene truths too literal to stand the scrutiny promised by uttering them at ordinary volume.

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Our gifts arrive as if from above, finding us through old fashioned detective work, I suppose, or the unerring instincts of the passenger pigeon. The sound grates on the ear, turns it into an unwilling participant in a process that suddenly bespeaks agony and the importance of internalizing agony so as to make it part of the self. But only

that part other people have difficulty recognizing. I remember days when the neighborhood grass brought the eggshell equivalent of hives to my body and nobody believed me when I explained what had happened. They looked at me like I had intentionally done something harmful to myself, had wished to move from this world to the next one in underhand fashion. But I didn't believe in the next world and I still don't. How do we unhook the upper portions, separate them from those that touch the ground, and still have enough left over for the spring clearance, for the throngs of people marching in this direction from the train stations and the ramps on the river? If you swallow a handful of the yellow pills, they will counteract anything unpleasant caused by the red ones. But a note of caution: recognize ahead of time that the hallucinations aren't always centered in your mind. The lynx that bound about on the rocks outside will, if you let them, tear your pillows to shreds and the members of the symphony sawing away in the background must, at some point, get paid. Otherwise, who's going to score your experiences, who's going to turn an ordinary stroll down the sidewalk into an epic adventure of the mind? Maybe it's time we start to file away each discreet episode from the past that still resides with us in its own mislabeled space.

That way we have little chance of pulling it out again on command and must trust to accident, to happenstance. Like that which permits us to enter a room we've never entered before and find there a piece of jewelry, a garnet ring, say, that went missing years before when we were fishing on the Gulf or when we were shaking hands with someone who would subsequently be engaged in condemning every house on the block simply because he possessed the foresight to gather all the paperwork necessary, hadn't left so much as a codicil to fend for itself in the dark labyrinths of the library, or the alleyways on either side of the library where the wind takes our words -- spoken or otherwise, arising in anger or in guilt -- and mixes them in unceremoniously with the rubbish, with the paper bags and the rotting husks of unidentifiable fruit, with the brown fragments of broken glass.

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After an interminable wait, another wait of lesser duration. And then someone comes to the door. I suspect our rantings are of interest only to our own subconscious minds. And that only when the cosmos has aligned itself properly. It lines up the far galaxies according to a pattern it's impossible to unravel if you haven't been paying

attention to the things you say in your sleep. This requires, of course, assistance from someone who shares your bed and is willing to lay awake nights with a notepad in her hand. An old man only about three and a half feet tall emerges and says he has been waiting for me ever since his own dreams began to fill up with visions of soufflés, with women who paid him the most exquisite attention because, they said, his name had come up in a drawing they held at the Eagles club down the road where people are forever going to escape the misery of their domestic situations, the radios tuned to stations they abhor, the shoelaces used to tie other shoelaces together in ever-bulkier conglomerations. I smell stewed rabbit coming from somewhere on the premises and make to push past the old man and into the house that seems now as if it has been sitting in this spot for over a thousand years, even though I know it is of more recent vintage if only because the whole country is still an infant in comparison with others even on the same continent. Maybe it's time we admit the flesh is susceptible to infection and attempt to rework it, to change its composition by adding elements not usually associated with the body and its component parts – the thick red clay that piles up on either side of the river, the plastics mixed and extruded in the plants that line that river like juvenile

swans. Certainly the results would be disappointing but then when have we ever examined those things we've made with our hands and our minds without some sense of having failed colossally? Of having brought shame on ourselves like that associated with masturbating in public? Or refusing when we have been encouraged to do so? A moment of disassociation, of what might even have been unconsciousness if by unconsciousness you mean the opposite of consciousness. Afterward, the patina shell of my forehead aches -- but has not, I hope, cracked again -- from a blow the old midget has apparently delivered with a pool cue he holds in his hand, one I hadn't noticed previously due to the unusually poor lighting in that part of the world after the sun has set. The moon, on the other hand, is not up to the task assigned it because the moon seems to think it only has to hang in the branches of certain species of tree and may ignore the others much the way we ignore those who pretend to know us after they have read our names on a nametag or (less frequently) a plaque.

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The evening is no longer brisk. It gives off the scent of alder and cinnamon almost gratuitously. In fact, we have trouble forgiving it for its kindness. Outside the windows the world



seems daubed in places with very dark paint, arranged in such a way as to lull us into a sense of well-being at precisely the same time the microbes are amassing along our borders, are sending out chemical feelers and communicating with one another through a system of images of the sort that can't actually be seen. What happens when we interrupt our thoughts with thoughts that belong to other organisms? That barely meet the minimum criteria necessary to be considered thoughts in the first place? Are we in danger of losing our way, of becoming something less than ourselves? Or perhaps something superior? Like those statues composed of iron that stand in a ring in the park on the outskirts of town and which look like ordinary businessmen with briefcases and bow ties, but which on closer inspection turn out to be the spitting image of anyone who gazes at them for more than five minutes, mirrors, if you will, that forego glass in favor of some psychic disturbance initiated through clever use of materials (like, I suppose, varnish) and the ever-shifting angles of the sunlight as it makes its way over and through the tops of the trees and hits the surface of the statues and bounces off, of course, and continues its journey into the retina where, if I'm not mistaken, it is swallowed up forever and disappears. How dreadful to imagine ourselves the end

point and agent of annihilation for that which enables life! That which enables vision! I prefer to stand at the sidelines and formulate theories that justify my own particular manner of existence and that denigrate all those who don't happen to share that manner of existence – who seem to genuinely enjoy the company of other people, say, even inviting them to their house for dinner on occasion and listening with rapt attention to the adventures they relate concerning where they have been recently and what they found there – silver ingots hidden in the cold waters of a Guatemalan stream; folk art canvases hung in abandoned warehouses in Berlin. And though the surroundings might be exotic, the depictions on the canvases are, for the most part, typical for the genre: two dimensional human beings wearing outsized hats and playing stringed instruments on a hillside otherwise populated with bearded goats and banners declaring the coming apocalypse. Each letter has been rendered in a different color in an attempt, I suspect, to command the attention of the eye, an attempt to make the message more palatable to those who might be tempted to turn away from the canvas through tedium or an innate lack of interest in the future brought on by any number of factors, but most prominently a diet poor in beta carotenes.

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Electric pulses range up and down my leg, reminding me for a moment of the substance coursing unseen through the walls, but just as suddenly there is a cessation of all energy and I black out. In my dreams miniature statuettes surround me and I have the feeling that some of them are attempting to communicate, to utter some final devastating statement through a medium other than speech. We have a name for the re-arrangement of the senses accompanying love in its initial stages, but we rarely use it because to do so puts us at risk of being labeled a romantic, or an ordinary dipsomaniac with romantic tendencies who is nevertheless afraid of the moon. Eventually one of the statuettes (representing, I believe, a local deity long since abandoned or discredited) claims he can alter his pulse simply by willing it to happen, can slow it down and speed it up on command but when I express skepticism he will not hold his wrist out for me to examine. He says he doesn't believe there are any other people on the planet in my situation, meaning, of course, someone seemingly composed of cracked and subsequently fused eggshell, round as a tear drop and sporting human limbs. Doesn't believe, in fact, that I exist, or at least not in the form he experiences, and so he all but accuses me of being an hallucination. Which is, I suppose,

when you think about it, kind of flattering. We aren't permitted to determine for ourselves the order of appearance of those things that happen, that come out of the blue and change our circumstances one way or another. But we are permitted to list them in the logbooks we keep in our jacket pockets, and then erase them again, or cut them out, assigning each event its own slender strip of paper, which we can then paste back into the book in an entirely different order. Or simply let blow away on the breeze, the benefit of doing so obvious to anyone who has been walking along the road where the cliffs drop precipitously a mere foot or two away from where the asphalt ends. Of course, for those of us living far away from cliffs of any sort, no benefit is necessary. We simply go about our business with the understanding that our feet are going to wind up on solid ground no matter what we do. And when we fall anyway, when we find ourselves tumbling and spiraling in space, reaching out desperately for any purchase whatsoever in the abyss that suddenly surrounds us on all sides like oxygen, we think perhaps the sensation has been foisted on us by someone with a stake in the outcome and the means of creating entirely new worlds out of the old one the way we turn our own worn clothing into puppets to entertain the children, or filters through which

to strain liquids should we find it necessary to separate those liquids from the materials suspended within them.

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Under the façade or what appears to be a façade when viewed at a certain angle, you find a second façade less extensive and less ornate. Patterned after Muslim arches and containing pictorial depictions of battles that never took place, at least in this hemisphere, it hums a little when the wind picks up which almost always happens in early November and continues for two straight months sometimes uninterrupted, the cornflowers close by bent double with the force and habit of it. When I lost my way, I pleaded with the gods to reveal themselves in the form of other more recognizable gods of the sort that had made their appearance previously in sacred texts the translation of which I always imagined myself undertaking just as soon as I found the time. But suppose this is all the time we will ever be allotted – that which we are currently immersed in like sulfur water at the hot springs. Will that mean we have no hope of accomplishing anything of value in spite of our making enormous efforts to re-route traffic or dispose once and for all of some leading theory in astronomy? Does that mean our dimensions have always been and will always be

similar to those of the person who stares back at us when we happen to stop by the edge of a pond and look down into the water there, which is shallow and does a poor job of concealing the creatures that pass by underneath? My longing comes and goes much like these animals. It makes its appearance and demands a hearing, all but scratches at the signposts that announce distances to cities in the region, these cities boasting names, like Vincennes, with their roots planted firmly in the past as if whoever lives there is afraid we will not take it seriously, that we will relegate it to the place where cartoons are set and where inanimate objects are therefore blessed with the power of speech. Pretty soon, though, my longing disappears again, runs up into the mountains where the snow is starting to accumulate even though it's still autumn on the plain and the bison are fattening up on what's left of the grasses.

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The explosives occupy a corner of the room, wrapped in tarps and stinking like something that has just dragged itself in from the swamp or slaughterhouse. I always before imagined the materials of annihilation as somehow pristine around the edges, clean as the piece of paper on which we write our arithmetic problems when we are younger, clean

as the liquid one uses to rinse the gore away from a wound that is not too serious now but which promises to get nasty if left to its own devices. I find a mirror in another room and examine my forehead, but whatever is there is no more frightful than what was there before, lines and cracks and strange wavy ravines in the shell -- all of it taped up after the fall or, in some instances, stapled. The logistics of this, the sheer impossibility of stapling a substance as brittle as egg shell, combined at once with the incontestable fact of it (the seeing it with one's own eyes), still keeps me up nights and causes a queasiness not unlike that which descends when one has smashed a finger with a hammer or witnessed someone leap from a tall edifice. I try to think of almost anything else when confronted with the sight of these metal dashes in the place where my body meets what is not my body and therefore all of creation minus this one thing that is me -- past sojourns on the Riviera, or at least imagined sojourns now taking on tangibility through repetition and a long-term addiction to painkillers, lately replaced with a short-term infatuation with a woman possessing wax bean skin and eyes like beads of mercury escaped from whatever container was robust enough, at least initially, to contain them. The heart has this habit of intruding itself into the more elevated parts of the body, the

airy heights, and insisting on explanations and rationalizations for things we ordinarily wouldn't consider worthy of any form of cognition at all. Like why the body is never entirely comfortable with itself. Why the hands are forever seeking out portions of other people's bodies to rest on or explore or torment. Maybe this is due to the intentions of some hypothetical -- but still formidable for all that -- ethereal Grand Poo-Bah, some cosmic architect with a capital A (and C), ensconced in his overarching dome and penciling in changes by the second. As the whim hits him or necessity dictates because nothing stands still even for a minute once he has let the process escape his control. Once he has turned it loose upon the wind and the gently rolling terrain of that theme park where he was most recently disposed of, made to seem irrelevant, through rational argument or vicodin-induced hallucinations.

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*What you learned from the previous owner you tried to conceal, tried to cover in an aural camouflage lately centered in the folktales of the Pyrenees. In the budgetary debates that turn our everyday lives into charts and figures we have a hard time recognizing as having anything to do with us. We might make replicas and attempt to stand on*



*them for an hour or two, but as soon as it starts raining, the cardboard frays and disintegrates, and our anxiety reaches such levels as has never been documented before. It morphs into something possessed of actual teeth and a strange hair / polyester blend that remains in our nightmares for weeks afterward. Settles there like refugees and makes ten o'clock an hour we dread because we have to put the kids to bed (assuming we have kids) and we know that soon afterward the whole history of the earth will start again and reach the present after meandering about in the pockets and crannies no one documented the first time through. I tried to steer this entity away from Eulalie, tried to save her from the embarrassment of having to halt its momentum with her bare hands, but failure in my endeavors stalks me from morning until mid-afternoon when Eulalie herself can be seen traipsing through the forests in search of whatever it is she has decided is missing from her life. We can't even begin to conceptualize this because our conceptual apparatus is so similar to hers it would be like the mind trying to map itself from without. Like a civil war re-enactor trying to position himself on the wrong side of the battle so as to view his own destruction, or pretend destruction as the case may be. It just causes a temporary disorientation and leads eventually (if not rectified) to a kind of guilt like that which*

*shadows us all the way to the workplace and nourishes itself on the impure thoughts that bubble to the surface there on average about once every twenty-three seconds. And sure, these thoughts are obstructed, they back up behind obstacles placed in their way purposefully, but they can never be entirely defeated, managing instead to take advantage of structural weaknesses in the obstacle itself or the terrain on which it has been placed where they drive in a wedge; they create space for the inevitable inundation. They push through and fan out on the other side and sweep everything away before them, leaving behind a devastated landscape very similar in appearance, I would assume, to the cratered plains of the moon. Or portions of an island after a volcanic eruption but before the return of the first shoots of vegetation – breadfruit and fig trees and weeds of every tropical variety -- the seeds for which were perhaps transported on the wind from the other islands in the vicinity that have not yet decided to destroy themselves through whatever mechanism causes these things to happen, up to and including perhaps what we would call ordinary boredom.*

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Dawn becomes the rumor that has passed through this township one too many times. No one believes any more the things being said because to believe anything seems to open one up to the possibility of having to believe everything. Even the stories about people living under trees, or transforming themselves somehow into animals with the help of the trees, or just stumbling from one tree to another looking for a sign that they are not wasting their time, that they are, in fact, in store for an eventful couple of years. Turns out the old midget's name is Sunday, which goes with his sideburns but not so much his diminutive stature, though it's possible he has given me a *nom de plume* in anticipation of the manifesto he intends some day to write. As near as I can make out, his beef is with the residents of the town whose lights are just visible through the swaying of the branches of the trees outside, or at least what I take to be branches because the laws of optics require there exist something solid between the subject and the object if the object comes in and out of view at regular intervals. That something must of necessity be in movement itself if the object is not in movement. We know light is in constant flux but we also attribute a static quality to it if we imagine the light originating from something as stationary as a year-round habitation. We can expect to be

placed under some sort of microscope if our thoughts leak out from their normal hiding places and wind up advertising themselves to all and sundry like cut-rate jewelers. Or are we simply inventing the microscope because we don't like the idea of a world where microorganisms can operate unseen? I know what it feels like when they run amok in the soft pockets of flesh surrounding your jaw, but as soon as I try to launch into this description, Sunday raises his odd knotty paw in the air and brings a hush to the room that even the stale air obeys, as if it has been waiting for years to demonstrate its allegiance to this man and his peculiar ideas concerning retribution, concerning parenthood and the sorting of indigenous plants into categories suggested not by the standard rules of taxonomy but by the imaginations of those who have little else to occupy them, who can't even manage a remark in defense of their deepest beliefs when they are finally made aware that they harbor such beliefs. That they aren't just wandering from place to place in haphazard fashion and at the mercy of that vacuum which passes, in some circles at least, for a soul.

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Let the blank places represent the intervals of time and distance between one well-known city and another. Then

scrap that and let them represent themselves until the impulse collapses under its own considerable weight. Until it leads us by the nose to the center stairwell and indicates we should jump. No one is sure, really, how this is accomplished but we open the floor up to suggestions and the silence is overwhelming. It begins to weigh on us like some odd and oddly beautiful collection of paving stones. If you were to open your veins in your arms one at a time under close medical supervision, or just on your own come two Tuesdays from now, and then play around in there with something that looks like a pipe cleaner, you still wouldn't be able to convince me your psychosis has returned. I know the evidence seems fairly substantial from where everyone else sits – which is close by the pond where the turtles overwinter in the mud at the bottom without ever, apparently, requiring any oxygen – but I refuse to weigh the evidence equally with the emotion. I refuse to let logic descend from its perch hard by the heavens, because as soon as it does, people are bartering all around you for not just the essentials, but luxuries. And luxuries of a sort we couldn't have pictured even three or four generations ago. Fresh asparagus. Socks with no holes in them. An infant carriage you are, I gather, supposed to wheel an infant around in when you decide it's time to go outside for some fresh air

rather than just sitting inside all day working Sudoku puzzles. We turn to tinder at the core, at the very center, and then we look around for a flame that doesn't show any indication of being struck. Instead everyday desires and something that looks a lot like what we called "wishes" when we were younger (we didn't have any better term for it, and, arguably, still don't) pile up in the corner usually reserved for an impromptu mental pantry. When we decide we will sort and separate them and deliver them to their various destinations using wheelbarrows if we must, those closest to us in stature (if not heart, because the heart is something that does not replicate – it starts fresh each time, like a villanelle) can't imagine what we have been up to all these years. They can't believe the lines at the corners of our eyes just appeared there one day, almost at random, when there was nothing particularly stressful happening. No end-of-the-year reports to file, no jealousy disturbing the air with its lime-like scent and its nearly limitless reverberations.

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Bland tones drift in from all directions, creating an atmosphere just like the atmosphere would be, I imagine, if there were no tones, no sounds of any kind other than

those made naturally by the occupants of this particular part of the forest, animals mostly, but not exclusively. The main idea, says Sunday the midget, is the proper admixture of light and dark, tall and short, seasons when the mists come in off the oceans and those when you forget in which direction the oceans lie. I would like to lay the blame on those who forget this fundamental rule or who pervert it intentionally, hoping to grab some notoriety for themselves before they slink off into their graves. Or their clubhouses constructed of plywood and hoisted high up into the branches of an elm tree. I remember, he says, counting the seconds between one thought and the next, or trying to, mapping everything out by increments and intuition, until it became readily apparent that I wasn't actually capturing individual thoughts, but the idea of individual thoughts, the marker, so to speak, thrown off by the movement of those individual thoughts through time and space, just as if the marker were some sort of electronic impulse or chemical reaction similar to those caused when large-bodied animals swim through a cluster of smaller-bodied animals in the sea and leave in their wake a phosphorescent flash, which is in all likelihood a primitive alarm system unleashed by those smaller organisms, but seems to our eyes a performance for our benefit. A complex array of lights and patterns

unleashed to entertain us when we are safely above the waves in a vessel chartered for the evening, or to frighten us half to death when we are up to our necks and treading water in those same waves, the night sky stretching away into the distance and the only sound for miles around being that of the water knocking up against itself as it travels in several different directions at the same time. Who knows how we got there; who knows how we got anywhere to this point? Perhaps it's best to just assume the circumstances weren't pleasant but they weren't unmanageable either. They were a lot like those birds that talk when you put them into cages. They have the potential to say the most hurtful things, to try to make you feel guilty. And you do feel guilty because the birds are in cages and not perched in the branches of the tropical fig trees that ought, by rights, to house them. But they don't say what you fear the most. They don't unleash a torrent of invective of the sort you actually deserve. They spend their time, rather, uttering phrases they've heard before. Simple things, with puns at the center.

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*Just how desirable is it anyway to be self-contained? To wander the forest with little more than the clothes on your*



*back and the memories fighting for space in your skull which is thin as paper as far as the cosmos is concerned and easily breached. What happens to those memories when they find their way outside the container, when they are let loose upon the atmosphere by an accident or an intentional dispatching of the soul of whose substance they form a significant part? Do they continue to exist in some version we no longer recognize, hobbling about like helium balloons with rocks tied to their strings? Or do they disintegrate with the rest, simply cease to be because they were never very real anyway? They held the same relation to actual substance that we hold to Plato's Ideas – simple passing representations disappointing in their flawed nature and their tendency to behave in ways that don't suit their position, that embarrass those who wish for the world and everything in it to add up. To find the termination of its column. You can't imagine the precautions a man who is an egg must take to make sure the rest of the world doesn't discover his secret! The multiple layers of cotton, the shying away from edges of any kind. Once, a woman very like Eulalie in appearance, but without the incandescent words in her mouth -- without the touch that sends knife blades into the body and the body welcomes it, the body calls out in ecstasy in bypass of the tongue -- found her way to shell*

*and said something intended to communicate surprise though I knew she suspected something from the very beginning. She licked her lips as if they did not belong to her, looked at me as if the needle in the meter were tilting so far in one direction, it indicated the meter itself was probably broken. How ruthless the mind is when the body is attached to it and serves its bidding! Sometimes I wish the tips of my fingers didn't exist because that way I wouldn't be forced to put them to such delicate work as they were created for. I wouldn't be required, for instance, to sharpen any more pencils or run them (the fingertips and not the pencils, though this too is an intriguing possibility) along thighs belonging to those who squirm and make promises involving the end of the world and the very last breath they will take. But who, only moments later, it seems, begin to suffer from amnesia and claustrophobia -- ailments there are medications for, sure, but which turn incurable once they are centered in what we refer to as the heart when we mean something more than just that which is expected to get the blood circulating through the veins.*

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Somewhere down there in all those lights obscured now and then by the movement of the tree branches are Octavia

and their son who was tall as a volleyball net even when he was young, an enigma to modern science to hear the midget Sunday's former companions and millworkers describe it, which they did at every opportunity they got, something as fascinating to them as, say, the origins of the great pyramid overseas or the lesser ones that appear here overnight on occasion along the roadsides. Made of sticks and rubble, leaning but almost always toward the east. This shouldn't surprise us given the tilt of the Earth as it spins on its axis and warbles through its mundane orbits around the sun. You can hear the creak of the machinery if you get somewhere so quiet as to allow it, somewhere without even a hummingbird in the vicinity to disturb your concentration with its wings beating at that staggering rate and the water falling from the sky because it has been traveling thousands of miles to get here and can't hold off any longer. It is heavy with its own desire. Sunday loads the explosives in the back of his truck and I assist, why not? If I don't, what am I going to say to those who ask me about the events of that evening after they have transpired? I am partial to stories of deception and heartbreak and ordinary human loss, but listening to them doesn't make me a better person. On the contrary. It makes me itch at the seams. As I understand it, Octavia stands at the end of a long pier and

drops something into the water, something clearly heavier than the water itself which closes over it immediately and hides it forever from view. What I wouldn't do, he says, the muscles and tendons in his arms straining at the weight of our cargo, to interrupt the past at precisely that point where it is fixing to go off the rails, to careen into the future sideways and smoking from the places where its bulk is rubbing up against the terrain that surrounds it, generating friction, generating heat to use against itself once the whole thing has come to its climactic, shuddering halt! Once the scars form and the soil grows moist again and you can hear something in the copse of trees two hundred yards away, something like a scream, but not one generated by terror so much as physical ecstasy. The one can seem so much like the other at times we will be excused if we refuse to follow our curiosity to the place where we think that sound originated, preferring instead to stick close to home and maybe lock the doors and windows and just wait for the snows to fall in a month or two and cover everything up beneath them so that maybe, with time, everything (and I mean of course mostly everything; the exceptions, I admit now on further reflection, must number in the tens of millions) will finally just go away.

\*

Eyes are watching from the tree branches. And culverts. You can feel them but you can't make out the colors or the angle and you don't know if what you imagine is identical to what someone else is imagining at exactly the same moment in a different time zone. But the question wouldn't even affect us if we weren't already in transit and stuffing ourselves full of Brazil nuts in preparation for a time of fasting to follow. Just the sort of thing that makes people wish they had been born to another faith while at the same time being able to appreciate the niceties of their own – like the colorful tales concerning the founders and the struggles they underwent so as to assist us in the struggles we are undergoing without being entirely sure what the purpose is. Why we are being asked to slough off layers of skin, for instance, when we don't have that many layers to begin with. On the other side of the veil, you find more eyes, of course, but one of them is blind, as can be ascertained simply by noting the color of it, or the lack of color – the milky hue that arises no doubt from a past traumatic injury or illness. We can count on one hand the number of times we have been asked to digest illness in this fashion, to take it in and relieve the original sufferer of his burden. It just doesn't happen that frequently, and when it does, the witnesses to the event all begin to hallucinate and some of them even approach a

state like catalepsy. But you can tell they are not going to make that particular transition. As soon as they get close, as soon as their mouths become rigid and their breathing slack, good Samaritans appear from out of nowhere and provide them with the balm necessary to reverse whatever it is they are suffering from. In this way what you have are two separate yet simultaneous approaches – that of taking in and that of expelling from without, and still! still there is no satisfaction to be had. No final escape from the original ailment any more than there is from a nickname that has been following you around from birth like a vestigial tail. Something embarrassing. Something you'd like to have removed if it weren't for the fact that surgical procedures are expensive and there are risks involved. You might not wake up from the anesthesia. Or you might. And when you do, you find that the whole world has been altered in some imperceptible way, some way so small as to be impossible to detect and yet it manages nevertheless to rob you of all ability to enjoy your surroundings. Even the pond where you like to go fishing is no longer, really, the pond you remember despite the fact that the same ducks gather there close to the shore and make their mild complaints. And the same nondescript ripples make their way relentlessly across an otherwise undisturbed surface.

\*

Barns take on sinister aspects in the moonlight, seem to spin around on themselves as you pass, though this could just be a result of our having spent too much time in the navy where everything is moving all the time. Especially if you are in the Arabian sea, as opposed to the Caspian which doesn't behave the way you would expect it to given its affinity to other bodies of water. At least that's what I have been told by those who refuse to spend their lives circling the same patch of ground like buzzards. Or moles, more accurately, because moles too must obey the law of gravity down to the last letter, to the punctuation at the end. The vial in the glovebox is unmarked, clear as plastic but for the liquid inside which is the color of plantains, before they are peeled, before they have even fallen off the tree. Sunday says it's an extract of some sort that will give me visions, though he can't say exactly what the liquid has been extracted from, a natural enough question given the circumstances and one normally apt, when left unanswered, to cause one to give pause before commencing whatever activity suggested the question in the first place. If the pattern persists, no one will know anymore why we keep feeling nostalgic for things we had no initial experience of, like French kissing for the first time

at an ice skating party on a frozen pond. Or listening to music that is just common barnyard animal noises layered on top of one another with the assistance of a computer. Suddenly, the veins in the tops of my hands seem overly prominent, seem to want to establish their own identities far from where they find themselves presently, and the tip of my tongue plays host, I can tell, to some sort of visitor, a dancer of miniature proportions none too skilled at his or her craft. I'd like to think it's a female, but the mirror is of no assistance, so I can't tell. The mirror bobs up and down at the side of the truck almost as if it is not attached and when I stare into it for long stretches of time, I see the first faint traces of another world hiding at the back of this one, mocking it, imitating it in deadpan fashion like someone's little brother at a picnic where, as usual, few of the adults are having any fun.

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Pleasures multiply until they are indistinguishable from their opposite, until they seem to lean over some sort of abyss and stare for an hour or more expecting I'm not sure what to appear. Other than the abyss itself which is a given from the moment we are born until the moment when we realize we have been born. And why this should be a



cataclysmic event in all but name only. The days lengthen and then lengthen some more and eventually we find ourselves occupying a slate blue room and wishing we could make our memoirs mean something to those who might chance upon them at a garage sale, say, twenty years from now and who might leaf through them with the same distracted air of a man who knows he has to meet an individual -- a member of his extended family, or an assassin, suddenly become vital to his emotional or physical well-being -- at the airport in a little less than four hours. But he doesn't know what to do with himself in the meantime. I find the impulse to get all of it down on paper, or the electronic equivalent of paper now that paper has become both prohibitively expensive and unnecessary, a greater sin than that of forgetting. Though, to be honest, I don't really believe in the concept of sin so much as I believe in the need to embrace the concept so as to help keep us from poking one another's eyes out. This is why sometimes you will find me lurking about in the shadows behind the dumpster close to a construction site or behind the Thai restaurant where I met the woman who would later become my first wife, though she will deny the connection to this day. She will tell you I dreamt the initial meeting and that only the final days contain any reality whatsoever – the

dividing up of whatever few belongings we had managed to accumulate together, the acrimony and incrimination. It's not like I go looking for environments, for locations to stitch together into one long and continuous backdrop. It's just that you have to occupy some patch of earth at any given time, don't you, and you can't stay in that place forever. Eventually, you have to move onto another one and occupy it for a certain duration, and then, of course, the process continues until you are dead and so no longer occupy any place, strictly speaking, other than perhaps the flimsy memories of those you came into contact with along the way. Those you recommended a song to once, for instance, or those who shared your bed for a month or a year and they recall some of the things that happened there even if they're not entirely sure they remember your name or what foods you might have been allergic to and so were careful to consume -- if you consumed them at all -- in only the most meager amounts.

\*

Blossom is such a bitter word. It laments something that hasn't yet occurred. It dries out the corners of your eyes where the blood vessels get tangled up as if they have each been given separate and conflicting directions. Leap from

one precipice to another and the last in the sequence seems suddenly less daunting, seems almost to require no effort on your part, the air around you providing a strange dreamlike lift that others reject out of hand as soon as you mention it to them. They peel the labels off their bottles absently, wad up the paper and pick at the adhesive. They start humming tunes under their breath as if they can't imagine what comes next, which words should follow which other words and in what order to best ensure some semantic continuity. Some means of delivering the message that, by all accounts, needs to get delivered if we are to stave off an invasion by the aural equivalent of locusts. Try to imagine a dwarf's fingers on the steering wheel of his pickup truck, the thickness and brutality of them, the almost sinister way they behave in unison while I am staring intently, focused and leering like a lunatic in a misguided attempt to bring back the ordinary way of looking at things I enjoyed before ingesting that cursed liquid of his, the way I looked at things before finding myself in the company of ethereal, animated combs (among other things), each about as long as my forearm and each possessing, apparently, the ability to speak, but only, it seems, to one another. The question becomes how do we know they are speaking if we can't hear them and we can't see their lips

move because they don't have any lips? Only teeth, and some of these longer and narrower than the rest, indicating we should pay closer attention to them because we are liable to find that which doesn't belong the way we find sometimes an unopened jar of pickles on the shelf at the library or hagfish slithering about in their own slime in plastic buckets on the pier far from their homes in the watery abyss. Let me back up. Let me concentrate my efforts for a moment on the ambient lighting inside the cab of the pickup truck, lighting provided by the radio dial, which itself seems to belong to a bygone era. When people still knew their mayors by name. When they could read from *Proverbs* in the morning and still have plenty of time leftover to cultivate the garden, to tell a filthy joke.

\*

Allotting equal measure to both sides inevitably results in jealousy, in shouts from the darkened corner where someone wishes to express his contempt for the proceedings, but all language has left him. Only volume, only guttural wails remain to fulfill the purpose. He is neither tall nor paralyzed and when the birds begin to congregate outside the window in numbers too large to ignore, we are forced to admit our projections have been

misleading, our nightmares have run aground and are leaking a neon green substance onto the sand. If we don't do something to staunch the flow, everything in the vicinity will be affected. Will turn, in fact, into its opposite, assuming, of course, it has an opposite. Some things, like fence posts, are unique in themselves and can neither be replicated nor assigned a place on a list if that list is intended to designate rank. You can determine this for yourself by checking for numbers and then reading the legend that either precedes the list or follows it. In some very rare instances, the legend throws no light on the list whatsoever. It attempts to draw all attention to itself through underhanded techniques of the sort we ordinarily associate with sexual predators, or the novel. At least as it was practiced at one time by authors too familiar to need mentioning. It has since been transformed into an entity having need of neither traditional legends nor erudition, though in the gardens (the real ones and not those found in the books themselves) they speak of both routinely, even bemoaning their disappearance with the same faraway sound in their throats they use without realizing it when the subject of childhood comes up and they remember that they never really had one. Or if they did have one it was short and knobby like a pinecone. Perhaps they traded their

childhood for some bits of soapstone and the rudimentary liquor one makes with whatever substance one happens to have on hand. Dandelions, say, or the apples that drop from the trees when it is cold and we are all engaged in searching (not desperately exactly, but not without a measure of urgency either) for someone to spend the evening with, someone we haven't met yet if only because -- everyone's being a stranger to everyone else by definition -- we can not claim to have truly made the acquaintance of even those we have been in the habit of waking up next to every morning for the past twenty years.

\*

My eyes have this habit of finding what's out there and making it seem vivid. Dare I say it? Real. They refuse to engage in any of the subterfuge I would prefer, the kind of thing that is popular in New Delhi among those who studied at one time to be street magicians but found the market glutted. They turned instead to a kind of sales miraculous in that it succeeds in moving products that don't actually exist. Have never existed because they don't obey the laws of physics. Sunday is perched atop his pile of phone books, this being the only way he can see over the steering wheel. He operates the brake and the gas pedal by means of a couple

aluminum contraptions he has strapped to his lower legs, extensions with what appear to be pieces of cardboard fashioned to the end of them in lieu of feet. It bothers me that I don't recall his strapping these things on; I don't remember the complicated process that must have been required when he first got into the truck. We are put together with materials remarkable for their durability, but finicky for all that, liable to unwind themselves without provocation like pieces of carpet in the corner of the room. Time has this bad habit of intruding itself upon our consciousness, demanding to be taken notice of even when there are much more interesting objects in the field of vision. Palm trees undulating seductively in that way they are known the world over for, kites painted to look like dragons or birds of prey in the sky. Is it any wonder we grow resentful, we begin to accuse time in our minds of playing tricks on us simply because it is mean-spirited and childish, the sort of entity that can't get over its own primordial image, its unhealthy fixation on the self?

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*The sound in the distance is Eulalie saying something I can't make out. The words are swallowed up by the forest which is immense and intent on covering over everything it comes*

*in contact with, spreading its vines and tendrils in a luxuriant riot until everything that has ever existed is merely suggested in outline. The abandoned car chassis, the section of a fence that has fallen over because someone heavy leaned on it or because the wind concentrated its every effort on that particular two-foot span for no apparent reason. I think maybe Eulalie never really meant anything she said to me in the past, and I'm even starting to wonder if I am remembering what she said accurately. Maybe I supplied the phrases and the occasions for uttering the phrases and when she refused to put them together, to combine them in ways that I found satisfactory, I did that too and then told myself that my agency wasn't the only one at work, that Eulalie felt the same things I did, and that when we were alone together, the world would never manage to find us. I was as happy then as I have ever been in my life. And I was certain she shared in a portion of that happiness. But then, why would she be so far away now that her words can not survive the journey? They disappear in the wind, they die on the air itself, in the sunlight, as if they were composed of isolated bits of algae removed somehow from the medium -- water -- that would otherwise protect them. The evenings seem pregnant with menace all of a sudden, as if we can expect little from our existence other*



*than mindless repetition punctuated by the occasional visit from shadowy figures whose main interest seems to lie in the reasons we have for that mindless repetition. They can't imagine why you would devote yourself to something over and over again when it is clearly not to your advantage. They take notes and whisper among themselves and their eyes, if they can be said to have eyes in any but the most rudimentary sense, glow from beneath cloaks the shape of which suggests their heads are longer than most and inclined to move rapidly from left to right without breaking the vertical plane. This causes me such vivid and terrible nightmares when I think about it that I am afraid to go to sleep. So instead I stay up formulating the things I wish to say to Eulalie should she ever come within earshot again. The chances, I know, are pretty miniscule, but I like to say them out loud anyway because there is a certain music to them and they mean something when added together much the way the ocean means something when you put it in a movie. It means you can go this far and no farther. It means someone is going to wade in there somewhere around the third act, and -- unless the others on screen do something selfless or heroic to prevent it -- completely disappear beneath the waves.*

*\**

The broad strokes divert our attention from their slender predecessors. And then degenerate. They cause those who admire them to repent, to wish they had never laid eyes on them after the turn of the century. When people were still looking for something to affect them as profoundly as does the ocean those who happen to live close to it, who routinely pull its contents onto their boats and dispatch whatever is still living with a blow from an oar. I like the idea of sharing our most intimate three or four minutes with people we have never seen before and are unlikely ever to see again, because you have to share these things with someone or else run the risk of becoming a lunatic in the old-fashioned sense of that term. Someone whose mood is ruled to excess by the cycles of the moon. Someone just as likely to know the bus schedule as he is to know his own hat size. Imagine if Octavia was simply a figment of Sunday's imagination, if she were no more corporeal than is the memory you retain to this day of the birds that congregated on the electric lines outside the windows during social studies class. You learned then what Sunday is no doubt learning now, his fever grown to desperate proportions like an infected limb, his eyes blood-rimmed and wild even on a night when the stars are reluctant to take part in any of the events that will later be described by those who were there

as vividly as if illumination were not an issue. As if they could see around corners with little more than a hand mirror to assist them and, of course, the imagination which, the way I picture it, is an entity rectangular in shape and haphazard in its construction. A practical joke gone entirely too far. The explosives are heavy and they seem wet and complicated and not altogether stable -- making a distinct hissing noise inside the tarps that conceal them, or maybe that's a snake, a stowaway. As a consequence (if anything at this point can truly be said to be a consequence of something else rather than simply a corollary of itself), I leave Sunday to arrange the bundles in whatever pattern he decides is necessary at the foot of the dam, and I climb back up to where I can see the lights of the town in the distance and listen to the water lapping at the darkness behind me. Miles of it, I imagine, backed up against where I stand. No one ever knows the names of those emotions that straddle a line, that begin in the readily identifiable and then slowly shade into the impossible to define somewhat like light on a window. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe if we know too much about what it is that gnaws at us ceaselessly we will begin to think there is a remedy for it somewhere. That we can escape it down the road by and by, and still have enough time left over to dry our socks by the fire.

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It's possible to shrink the middle, to alter it irrevocably simply by gazing at it a certain way. For example, the leaves borrow their design from the shadows cast by the leaves. This informs us it's pointless to wallow in the sort of self-loathing that besets the others within moments of their being born, that argues for its own inevitability without pausing for breath long enough for the rest of us to catch up. I guess I am sort of surprised by how bright the explosion is, or perhaps by how dull it is reflected in the tops of the trees. Either way, the sound follows so immediately I begin to wonder if maybe the two aren't really connected after all, if they have simply been tied together by association, by proximity in time, so long now we can't help but to continue the tradition. Is it possible to love someone before you have met that person? And I don't mean by the term love what most of us mean when we use that term. I don't mean the physical intimacy and the false sense of trust followed almost immediately by a distrust so thorough and solid and implacable you might almost mistake it for a hunk of concrete poured somehow into the middle of your abdomen where much of the most vital viscera was housed at one time. And maybe it's still there, who knows? Maybe it has simply been displaced for the time being, scooted

over to the corner where it is expected to continue functioning without drawing undue attention to itself. Meanwhile, the pain is exquisite. And while you'd like at a certain fundamental level for that pain to cease, there is a part of you as well -- probably not as ancient as the first, probably not as larval, so to speak -- that desires the pain to continue. To increase even, in increments each more intense than the one that preceded it.

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The passage of several decades is required to see the results, and then only in the form of graphs and tables that don't speak to the soul. The soul is a concept that I happen to subscribe to but only because it was forced down my throat by an uncle who was also terribly fond of bourbon, the sort of man who belabored points because he didn't think anyone was really listening to him. He was the first to point out the practical difficulties of making love to a woman when you are made primarily of egg shell, but I had already been considering the problem from the oblique angles natural to childhood. Strange how an eye for detail changes the entire structure of one's life, the ability to see the particular with the overarching, to discern in dark corners other corners darker still and the cast-off bits of

skin, the discarded fingernails and obscene notes written in mascara on cocktail napkins. Lately the difficulty seems to lessen inasmuch as I ignore it or embrace it as the situation warrants. Certainly the woman with dreadlocks and wolf blue eyes found all explanations sterile and merely had to point in the general direction of what it was she expected to awaken within me a distant memory, an urge and response housed within the entire species, or at least that enormous portion of it not so wrapped up in annotating *The Sagas of the Icelanders* as to have lost their will to live outside the study. I enjoy the sound of the spring bubbling to the surface as much as the next guy, and the birds floundering about in the mesh nets hung between trees for the express purpose of slowing them down, of making a meal of them should there be nothing left in the larder. We roast them whole, after plucking them of course and discarding the viscera, in which, if you look closely enough before discarding it, you will see patterns that can (so the story goes) inform you of what is likely to happen in the future. It takes practice and a little guidance from a trained haruspex before you become really adept at seeing there anything other than random smatterings of blood and grease. But that shouldn't discourage you. After all, the future is going to happen whether you predict it or not.

Imagine, should you get things right, the accolades that would follow! The shouting your name from the rooftops where people would have gathered, I guess, for the express purpose of shouting the names of those who had done something extraordinary. Otherwise, why would they be up there in the first place? And why would such an expression have been handed down to us from previous generations who tried, but failed, to imagine what we would be like and what we might think of them? Whether we would remember their accomplishments in architecture and the conquering of the seas. Whether we would consider them primitive because they too had stumbled upon twelve-tone musical scales and the equivalent of what we would call today expressionism and asemic storytelling but turned away from them because they didn't see the value. They simply did not understand what it was they had discovered.

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By the time I reach the ridge and look down at what is traveling beneath me, the sound has already reached my ears – like that of a couple dozen locomotives all moving in a single direction. The water takes on a violent beauty as it careens and falls on itself, as it uproots trees and carries them along with it in the restless gray reflections of the

moon. Then in the distance, the lights of town, as yet unchanged, an entire citizenry with no more notion of what is about to descend on them than I have of what a Gregorian calendar is or how exactly it differs from the other one, whose name I can't recall. Our worst instincts are separated, as I see it, by just a few degrees from our finest, the both of them so similar in the larger scheme of things as to seem identical. I imagine someone affixing labels, trying desperately to invent distinctions where there aren't any and then trying to undo those distinctions through tricks of the tongue, through puns and word play that don't fool anyone. That strike those in attendance (assuming anyone has made it past the guard dogs slobbering and snarling at the entrance) as half-hearted attempts designed to throw them off track, to distract them from the matter at hand, though they seldom reach any agreement as to what that is exactly. My first thought is of Octavia, though I haven't even met her; I wouldn't recognize her on the escalator if she was going up and I was going down. I picture racing to her rescue in the midget's pickup truck, careening wildly down the mountain roads just ahead of this tsunami Sunday has manufactured out of his lunatic fury, his imagination turned to murder because his son is loftier than he is and so proof and illustration of something sinister



occurring beyond the confines of his flesh. I picture scooping the woman up as the walls of the house disintegrate around us and riding those planks and pieces (the larger ones at any rate) to some place as yet untouched by moisture in extremis, unaltered by superabundance itself a lot like that said to affect the mind when it is facing its own imminent extinction.

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Pump that space free of liquid, and you have an empty space but for the sound that attaches itself to your memory and refuses to relinquish its grip. It is very similar to the leech in this regard and reminds us that our time is fleeting but only if we regard time as something that passes. If instead we treat it as something to be harnessed and then whipped viciously we are less likely to suffer at its hands and so be forced to heed the taunts of others. I try to scratch out exactly what is occupying my mind at any given moment, but the nature of that thing, if you can call it a thing, never quite stabilizes and so doesn't lend itself well to any activity with a clear goal, like scratching. I suppose another approach might be more successful, an attempt in another medium that doesn't rely on words or fingers or sticks, but the matter to be relayed is resistant finally to

every substance that is not itself, much the way the hand is best understood by looking directly at it and not trying to explain after the fact to someone who wasn't there what the hand was able to accomplish. If I borrow fifty dollars that doesn't mean I am destitute but it does suggest I am lacking in human interaction and wish to rectify matters by engaging in the one activity guaranteed to elicit emotional responses from those I approach. Ok, so maybe disgust isn't a bona fide emotion but the movement of the facial muscles just beneath the skin still makes for a kind of entertainment and frequently causes me to stop what I am doing and attempt to take mental notes of the sort that, if they were actually written down, then expanded upon with vivid illustration and commentary, might fetch top dollar in some marginally sophisticated circles. Even garner the sort of notice perhaps more appropriately belonging to the activities of the astronomers when they are arguing amongst themselves as to what a certain smudge in the distant night sky means and what they should name it if it turns out to be something deserving of a name rather than just another non-object occupying an expanse of non-objects so enormous as to defy the boundaries of the human imagination.

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When stability gives way to something else, something like dandelion seeds tossed about on a breeze, you'll find people whispering to one another. Some of them wear gloves and they wave to you in the darkness but you can't see them because the light waves, by definition, are absent. They are all but mythical at this stage, something you might wish to write a treatise about if you aren't too busy doing almost anything else. I know Sunday the midget is gone, swept away as a consequence of his own lunatic passion, but I spend an hour or more after the sound of the water has diminished imagining him alive and well a mile or more downstream, having surfed the entire way on a tree trunk or a bit of Styrofoam washed to the surface just before he was about to drown. There is no reason for these reveries, no secret longing or philosophical position revealed beyond that which makes some of us wish for better circumstances for those we hardly know. Those we see sometimes at the bus stop clutching their meager possessions or recent purchases to their chests as if they suspect a falcon or something is likely to swoop down from the tree branches nearby and carry their treasure off with it into the heavens. To drop it maybe over the sea when it realizes there is nothing edible in its talons, that the world has played a practical joke on it once again. Eventually I make my way

back to Sunday's pickup truck, parked still high enough above where we placed the explosives to have survived in one piece, though its windows are shattered, ten thousand diamond bits of glass on the seat and the dashboard. I search around a bit and find the keys where he has left them, not in the ignition, which would have been tantamount to an admission after the fact of something like suicide, of knowing what he was going to do down to the minutest particle, to the breath that everyone he knows or had known in the past would be taking at this precise moment. Or an hour or two from now, it doesn't really matter. No, his keys are on the ground looking like a conglomeration of snails forced together by the mud all around them or the time of year when they are expected to shed their shells and prepare themselves for the slow secretion of newer and larger versions. They don't wish to be alone during this process. And who can blame them? Imagine how self-conscious you would be, how prone to depression. Imagine the change in temperature and how you would react to it if you had never before been made aware that there was such a thing as temperature or that there were properties on this planet subject to manipulation and so any expectation you might have that the world as you experienced it would never change was

certain to be disappointed in much the same way you are certain to be disappointed when someone offers you a glass of water on a hot day and there are just a couple of ice cubes in it, each melted down and diminished into little more than a sliver.

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The going is rough, the roads having been totally destroyed in a path about as wide as two football fields and travelling for miles into the town on one side and then out on the other. Fortunately, I know my way around and can find alternate routes after having lived here for years and having dreamt about this place previous to those years for an equally lengthy amount of time. Strange how we believe almost anything someone else tells us so long as it seems at least slightly credible, so long as it doesn't require us to suspend the laws of physics momentarily, to announce to the world that we are not who we claim to be. But rather a phantom composed entirely of symbols and regrets, of limbs so long as to suggest malformation and incurable disease. Where are the sonic disturbances, the melodies and the words applied to the melodies, designed to attract attention? Where are the days when we were expected to hike a mile or more to the outpost and discuss the situation

with men and women who didn't seem to recognize us, who thought perhaps we had arrived there from the mountains lately inundated with snow? Once arrived at my destination, I see something very like what Vesuvius must have done to her communities, only considerably more moist, mud and debris to a height of fifteen feet in the few trees and power poles still standing, bits of farm machinery wrapped like tinsel around anything sturdy enough to have withstood the water's advance – the remnant corners of brick buildings, stone blocks from the bridge upstream. Try ironing the image of a bird from the air through which it has already flown. You will experience an awe and frustration mounting to terror but where does this come from? Why must it follow this particular cycle when we are willing to explore other avenues, other ideas still germinating inside our minds like corn? As part of the postscript you might consider making the main theme explicit, tying it to the movement of something that doesn't ordinarily move, that one might even mistake for a local monument or tower, just the sort of place teenagers visit when they wish to hide from the condescending or disapproving glare of their elders and get a little drunk. Where they think they might, if given the proper chance, escape the mortality that awaits us all simply by informing the universe of their names and

the salient features of their biographies. The mediocre schools attended. The hopes that taste like licorice on their tongues when they speak them out loud, and that feel (you'll remember) oddly gritty -- like torn newspaper -- when they fall apart later in their hands.

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*The cutoff, the point of starting over ought, by rights to appear somewhere other than in the middle of things, the place where everyone is expecting change, sure, alteration, but in moderate doses. They expect the tone of the handwritten notes to become slightly more demanding or hysterical, but the paper should remain a similar consistency throughout. I try to obscure the sound of hammers outside with headphones and in those headphones music that seems strangely familiar if only because every song is built like every other song using common notation and instruments of the sort first invented in previous centuries and since perfected. Or perhaps abandoned. By people who long for perfection but realize that finding it necessitates that it be taken away from you almost immediately. This requirement is part of what makes it what it is and if you try to circumvent this requirement, you merely rob the perfect object of its perfection. You turn it into something very like*

*yourself. Eulalie came down out of nowhere and lived for a while with me in the light. Light such as that you find in open places, or certain novels. Those by Czech writers, say, concerning themselves with what it means to be alive, to love and to suffer but to suffer nobly in the human confusion of that love. But it didn't last long. Somewhere out there, in the forest maybe, without even the benefit of a fire to dispel the gloom and the bone cold like that in castle walls, there is someone hunkered over tired old tomes written by people primarily interested in what it means to be dead, to live in darkness and to bring everyone with you into darkness, into insanity through a child's pretend knowledge of witchcraft and other nonsense. So now I live, without Eulalie, in a house. The house is like a place where people used to live and when we look for some sign of them, some sense that they were here and had left their mark the way we might be said to leave our mark when we carve an animal figure out of soap or stand in the hallway and just reflect light back at whoever happens to enter the hallway and look at us, we find almost nothing. A few stray strands of hair caught in the fabric of a chair. An earring discarded on the carpet. To see these things, to know what they mean and to say them out loud and have no one hear you is unbearable. Pretty soon, they too begin to fade.*



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A slapping sound in the alley, a cool breeze carrying on it the scent of mud and someone's breath when she has been drinking vodka and talking too much, drying out the saliva and creating extra real estate for the microbes we always imagine as possessing primary colors and behaving in ways that seem designed to make them fascinating to those who find no fascination in their own kind. Who whisper to themselves in crowded rooms and invent whole worlds to occupy once their own has proven too narrow to suffice. At first I think it's Sunday the midget and Octavia re-united in the madness of what he's done, reconciled, at least momentarily, through annihilation and murder, but I am mistaken, at least as concerns the stature of the man. It is an understandable mistake, these strangers embracing on the slippery cement remnants outside what might have been their home, someone's home, or a tavern, say, frequented at any other time by people desiring the same thing everyone else desires, if perhaps too strongly and with little chance of fulfilling those desires except through desperate measures like lighting someone else's cigarette or falling to the floor and pretending to have a seizure. It is the fish, the carp, white in the moonlight and thick as an undersized man's arm, flopping heavily all around the pair

where they pair themselves naked and gasping in the flood's aftermath, in the tangles of weed and wire, the pungent black river mud transported this far in something like protest – it is the fish, the carp that mislead me as to the size of the man's limbs and so when it is not Sunday the midget there (and probably not Octavia, but who knows; I've never seen her), just two otherwise anonymous souls pulling what they can together from the devastation, from the broken bricks and dog carcasses of a town they might not even ultimately belong to, I lose interest and continue to what must have been three or four hours ago the outskirts. The frontier in a world where everything now is a frontier, if by that term you mean a place where no one knows what he is supposed to be doing. No one can precisely define his role.

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Things leave off basically where they began according to the witnesses who number around a thousand souls and who are exhausted. They demand, in their own timid way, through hand gestures and an incessant rolling of the eyes, to know who is in charge and when they will be allowed to resume their own independent existences on the interminable grasslands of Nebraska. For my part, I wish we

hadn't said the things we said to each other recently, instead choosing to say nothing at all and simply fishing for sturgeon on a lake that, as far as anyone can tell, has no name. It simply sits out there all alone in the dark when it is dark and the daylight when the day sees fit to arrive. You can't imagine how difficult that border time can be, that place between the two states where the stars are said to fade high up overhead. But I have rarely seen this, at least not since I've been asked to handle so much of the burden on my own. I know, I know, this will elicit groans and guffaws from those who have lost everything, have had to start over with their bare hands and little more than a couple dry biscuits in a plastic bag. But still, the dreams don't lie except when they find it in their best interest to change the details around and even then you can tell what it is they are up to – I think the deep pit described in the literature (and repeated by someone who has taken me into her confidence recently as if she too were familiar with that literature, as if she herself, in fact, had written some of it) can hardly be as treacherous as it first appears. If it were, if it contained some medium – some liquid or shadow – without end and without purchase for the hand of anyone who happens into it, then why are there signs posted all around it inviting us in? Why are there soothing sounds

being emitted from it and aromas like lavender which, as everyone knows, is associated only with the finer aspects of modern living? With spa treatments and bicycle paths. No, something akin to plain speaking can be the only explanation and when you attempt to turn all of this on its head, try to make of it a narrative involving the shattering of the soul down to its very foundation, you are merely feeling sorry for yourself, are engaging in that process my father used to dismiss as “the inevitable unsheathing of demons” even as he had only just recently unsheathed a few of his own and was being tormented by them nightly in the basement or the attic.

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*Below the surface barely audible voices gather and swirl together in intricate patterns like seaweed. Eulalie too tries to communicate something to me through hand gestures but I don't have the manual with me. I can't make heads or tails out of what she is saying. I remember a time when she concerned herself with the nature of the shell, suggested that I might want to re-imagine my exterior so as not to invite ridicule. She was worried I would be remembered solely as the man who represented something fragile and that living through suggestion in this fashion could only lead*

*me to the abandoned warehouse where others just like me were busy destroying their minds with liquor concocted on the premises using copper tubing and ingredients growing and readily available in the empty lots close by. She elaborated for days. Shouldn't there be an extinguisher in the corner, something to allow us to halt all discussion at the point where we have become bored by that discussion? We have heard the same ludicrous scenario played out fifty times and more? You must remember the dual nature of all membranes – their ability to keep the outside world at bay must be countered by their ability to let whatever exists inside out when it is time for it to escape its containment. The same applies to yours truly, who couldn't imagine spending his every waking moment trying to prevent whatever is inside from spilling out at some point and getting lost in the sand at his feet. Running down in between the grains and disappearing much as the world disappears sometimes when we close our eyes, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it magnifies itself and intensifies and becomes something so remarkable and beautiful and strange, we can't take our eyes off of it. We spend the rest of our lives trying to come to grips with what we saw even if only for that moment. We write about it in our tales that pale in their effect when compared to the original vision, but*

*we keep at it. We lock ourselves inside rooms with no windows and only the one door that lets us in or out and we hammer away at those tales until they become something so un-tale like, so contrary to the accepted notions of narrative and escape, others begin to wonder if we ever really intended to capture anything significant with them at all. Or if instead we simply intended to lead our readers astray, to drop bits of cultural detritus and false leads into their path by the hundreds and thousands until the path itself became something they didn't believe in any more. It remained something to follow, though, only because they had to follow something. They had to keep moving so that the natural world couldn't close in around them and obscure their vision by turning them finally into tendrils and vines.*

*\**

*Rooms off the main hall appear occupied, or recently occupied, the blankets strewn about haphazardly like compliments, the kettle still steaming and a scent of flesh all pervasive. Where do we wind up when we rush headlong into the evening and try to locate strangers who won't remain strangers for very long? The pipes overhead hum with the movement of whatever they contain and the sound echoes off itself until I'm not sure which is the original and*

*which the simulacra, though the question itself presupposes a knowledge of the inherent aural terrain that I do not possess, a knowledge of where the past fits into the present by imitating it as closely as it can using conjecture and the past's extraordinary capacity for recall. One night the rain was on the windows and the candles were throwing their inferior light against the walls and outside we could hear the cars moving about beyond the line of trees that separated us from the rest of the world. Hundreds of people had just graduated from some school the name of which escapes me, though I'm sure, given the location, it had something to do with locomotives, with arriving at your destination in the middle of the night when the stars are still thick as crystals above your head. Imagine gongs and the repeated shrieks of beaded lizards, or the electronic equivalent of such things piped in on a single speaker, and Eulalie holding to me as if I were the object missing from the center of her chest, as if we knew no more of the proposed dissolution of the universe than does a head of lettuce. The ferocity of her movements, the diamonds in her eyes. Today I hear the song again, the vocalist concerning herself with a madman in a dark room, but her solution is not our solution, is it? Eulalie, for all I know, at this very moment is crossing a rope bridge over a canyon and beneath her the world contracts into its*

*habitual V. It changes shape and color without the first hint that anything untoward is about to happen. And when its denizens find themselves crushed lifeless by the procedure, who is there to witness this? Who even remembers what each individual thing that had been there before but which is there no longer was called?*



## Series Two

As all roads have been washed away (or all that might reasonably be expected to lead somewhere in particular), I abandon the truck in favor of a johnboat somehow miraculously spared the violence of the deluge and make my way leisurely downstream. I expect at any moment to be set upon by survivors, scofflaws and tax accountants, looking to impose their worldview upon anyone attempting to operate without a worldview. Which is about seventy-eight percent of us now that the sky has ceased moving and its faraway contents have been frozen into indecipherable forms and patterns. How are we to resist the trite phrasing and overused vernacular that seeps from the very stones themselves, that turns purple just as soon as it hits the air with its heavy concentration of nitrogen and other less than useful elements and compounds we admire from afar precisely because they offer nothing of value? They are afterthoughts of the universe itself, an entity not exactly known for its complex thinking. Sometimes I think it would be better to just admit I suffer from delusions concerning the composition of my body, to see the trunk as flesh and viscera rather than what it is – eggshell; a solidified outer layer of calcium. Others might then be more likely to engage me in conversation or loan me a hundred dollars should I

find myself in need. Karl Popper has taught us nothing if not to test our hypotheses by first assuming they can be refuted, and this one simply can't be refuted. As soon as I make the attempt, my eyes grow weak and my mind turns on itself like a scorpion in a hall of mirrors. The mind sees shell where there should be none and ears that are symmetrical but still misshapen for all that. It abandons its position -- hands in its badge, its credentials -- and lights out for a peninsula where the locals and visitors alike are already gathered in enormous numbers, waving torches about in the air and dancing to the sound of drummers who are, it seems, paid by the hour to keep everyone around them whipped into a frenzy.

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I inventory the empty places in my bones, in my organs -- the multiplying cavities and voids where I should find nothing but body, or something so like the body as to be its twin and replica. I take the resulting list to a physician, someone who can tell me what I am supposed to do to remedy the situation. I am hoping for sage advice, snippets and excerpts from Cicero, from the *Popul Vuh*, because there is something stale and unsatisfactory about treating the body as if it were a machine. Something to be tuned up

and re-fitted on a regular schedule. Wouldn't it make more sense to wait for the body to declare itself a simple auxiliary of the mind before we attempt to make it whole again? Shouldn't we at least give it credit for trying? If you stand at the edge of a precipice and look down, what you will see is most likely a mirror image of what you expected to see well before you ever reached the edge. And by mirror image I mean something turned around, backwards. It is the opposite of that which should be. Something so familiar and yet completely broken as to remind you (hopefully before it is too late, before you go plunging to your death without meaning to, simply because once we get close to the edge of anything, we are somehow required to determine for ourselves if, in fact, it is an edge rather than something else; some other, less lethal, and therefore less meaningful, structure) of nights when the rain was turning to snow and you could almost hear the transformation from where you were lying on your bed by yourself in the dark. It sounded like someone grinding his teeth, but in an adjacent room. It sounded like the locked knob on your door turning.

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The sun comes up directly over the place where the river turns away to the south, its light transforming the water

into half-water and half-solid surface, even if only momentarily, the interval lasting I'd say on average about three-and-a-half seconds. The purpose in trying to determine this interval is lost on anyone who might be watching. From the hills where the light has yet to bring any relief from the darkness. From the windows in the houses that overlook the river here and there as if they were merely curious. I should, in going forward, banish all use of tableau. It hinders our appreciation of that which is being depicted precisely because the parts are subsumed within the arrangement of the whole. Or at least so goes the theory as expressed by those who make a living concocting theories that should not (according to other, separate theories) agree with the theories concocted by those who share office space with them. Very little of benefit can be said to result from this activity, but people still pursue it because they believe idle hands lead to certain exotic and completely incurable mental disorders. They are afraid of what their bodies are saying to them. My thirst is monumental. It refuses to slake itself on the handfuls of muddy water I bring to my lips directly from the current on either side of the johnboat. Soon nausea overwhelms all mental process, including the memory of the promises made to the maker of all things, and I understand the

significance of the color black for the first time in my life. It is an all-pervasive entity the weight of which you would think would be much greater than it actually is. But weight itself is one of those fictions we can mostly do without, like how time lengthens when you are in pain and how it disappears altogether once you have learned to embrace that pain and make of it a tale with a beginning, a middle, and another beginning. "Tale" is probably not the right term, but I suspect the right term has yet to be invented. We may have to wait decades, as much of our collective energy these days is devoted to defending the practice of digging holes in the ground for no apparent reason against the slights and insults of those who are not involved in the practice. Who see it as yet another instance of our placing too much emphasis on the value of the natural world and not enough on the value of that which lies outside it and so is harder to pin down, is harder to prove even exists except through the use of intricate analogy and the obsessive deployment of that old workhorse, *terza rima*.

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*An alphabet demands little in the way of obedience. It treats us as if we have always been present and will always remain present. Like light. Or what people call fear when they are*

*searching desperately for some word to explain why they behaved the way they did. Tweaking the consonants more often than not results in a strange humming sound and then, unfortunately, we are back where we started, hoping for something enormous to jump out at us, to serve as a temporary decoy while the real culprits escape through a side exit. Eulalie has been patient, but that patience, you can tell, is beginning to evaporate, to ascend to the heavens where it will be broken up into parts and re-shuffled, distributed again on the breeze like water molecules and bits of pollen. She knows the late nights are not spent among the gentry, the flute solos not meted out with anything resembling caution. Her back is turned, the forest in the background seems to swell to twice or even three times its normal size, and I know instinctively this is not an illusion. Eulalie is in charge of everything we see; she controls it somehow with her mind, the same way we do, and if you were to identify the mechanism that allows it, what good would it possibly do you? How would you explain it again to others without feeling completely inadequate to the task? I stitch the requisite words together using something like thread, only I find, after much pulling at it with my fingers, it doesn't have any real substance. It is generated out of itself, and should you try to isolate it so as*

*to be able to repeat this procedure, you would be left with little more than an eye that won't stop twitching or a memory of a time when you were trying to say one thing and you ended up saying another. God knows, there are plenty of those. When pressed, Eulalie repeats her belief that jealousy is the thing that makes the sun come up in the morning. But by this, of course, she means that which, should you step off the side of a cliff or a balcony, will send you plummeting to earth where you will find, at best, all your bones have been broken. All the same, she is not happy at being pressed, and makes her feelings known. She does this by disappearing for weeks at a time, wandering off into the darkness of the forest and the canyons scattered about throughout the forest -- all while managing somehow at the same time to stay seated on the couch beside you in the evenings, to brush her teeth methodically at the master bathroom sink.*

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We trust the senses to function at half capacity most of the time, but this trust has not exactly been earned, and when we find ourselves deceived, we throw objects around the room in what might appear to an outside observer as a jealous rage. A tantrum having at its center the fear that we

are turned inward on ourselves so thoroughly that we will never be able to escape. The grass grows to the height of the front windows and still we hold ourselves about the knees and whisper oaths that don't possess the ring of truth. That rely on geographical notation to such an extreme degree, they are likely to be studied in the not-too-distant future by ethnologists and archeologists hoping to secure valuable information about where we lived and why we lived there and why we ultimately disappeared. And sure, these are all questions we should be asking ourselves beforehand, but who has the time, what with the gazing at the stars at night and the long discussions about what we should do with the information we gather? Should we write our observations down or just let them hang in the air like musical tones? Those that originate not in the mind of the musician or even in the belly of his instrument, but in the turning of the wide world itself, the motion that is motion without our ever experiencing it except through the ears. And even then, some people claim you must be deranged in order to receive the full benefit, that this derangement can not be accidental or haphazard. It must be something you accomplish yourself through the use of substances like the exotic powders I frequently keep with me in my jacket pocket. Or simple practice, whichever is most effective. I'm



not sure I agree, though, with the majority when it comes to this issue as they have been misled frequently about almost everything, and when I hear what others have referred to as the music of the spheres, what I hear is a kind of grinding like that you might expect when someone is attempting to shift gears on a standard transmission from second to third and gets stuck back in first again for a moment without meaning to. Does this make me unbalanced or am I just simply more attuned to my environment than most because I don't believe it possesses any reality in itself and must first appeal to my imagination before it can be allowed to exist at all? Does it mean that I am overly fond of those powders I mentioned earlier that taste faintly of garlic and come in packages with inscriptions on them in foreign languages? It seems no two of these packages are adorned in the same language. Each is unique. Some of them even utilize no recognizable alphabet at all - just pictures of tigers on them, and colobus monkeys and vine-smothered plants all rendered in an unusually delicate hand.

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Off in the distance, the mill wheel stands frozen. An emblem of something as yet to be determined. A reminder that all

reminders are superfluous. The closer we get to it, the further we are from that state we refer to as euphoria because we don't know what else to call it. We haven't any experience in this part of the world and so we necessarily rely on descriptions we have brought with us from home much the same way we brought our livestock and our particular way of tying knots. Under the shelter of the rock overhang, tiny invertebrates scurry about in the moist soil and one can scoop them up by the dozens in one hand. It isn't wise to do so, though, as they are perfectly capable of protecting themselves with venom. Of course, I enjoy the sound of screaming as much as the next guy so long as that sound is far away. But the plan seems to involve drawing a line nearby and then seeing who might be willing to cross it -- if, that is, anyone can be rustled up to serve in that role. Right now, we are completely alone and have no desire to play the part of adversary ourselves. Not that the part is mandatory or that we wouldn't do a good job. It's just that the ground rules seem to have been written up ahead of time, and in haste, so that violating them would no doubt bring about more than just simple forfeiture. Extinction is not too strong a word. Better to hearken back to a time when the air was cold to the touch. It carried with it a promise of romance acceptable even to those who didn't

see themselves as susceptible to that particular set of emotions or circumstances, who didn't believe they were suited, for instance, to walking hand-in-hand from one ordinary place to another in the company of someone else, who still envisioned a future sitting alone in a chair facing in the direction of the newly-risen sun and drinking from a decorative glass full of absinthe. They were, of course, mistaken, but not in the way you might imagine. They were destined, many of them, for positions of great responsibility on aircraft carriers or sitting atop towers made of glass and steel. For long and unbelievably fulfilling lives spent in the company of people who hadn't even been born at the time of their original, desolate visions. People who would one day be engaged in delivering their eulogies, in filling those eulogies full of references to Meister Eckhart and those nineteenth-century theosophists who presided over séances where the furniture rose and rattled about the room on occasion like outsized crabs hoping to get themselves reunited with the surf.

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Each day is the day it could dry up completely, the alien voice that issues from your throat at moments when you think you have nothing whatsoever to say. Moments when

the adrenalin is flowing due to unforeseen circumstances – ladders leaning suddenly backwards, meteorites passing by so closely overhead you can hear the air expanding. Still, the calendar keeps turning itself over and the phrases add up to numbers beyond counting and those who listen to you, when they are not too busy baking bread or fiddling with their toes which have become rough for some reason at the edges and threaten to turn in on themselves like the reproductive appendages of ferns, think that perhaps you are not the one uttering these things. They are being channeled through you and when you disappear, they will be channeled through someone else more intelligent yet and less likely to crave attention for something he hasn't actually accomplished. After three or four days living off of whatever happens to land in the vessel – grasshoppers especially which taste a little like popcorn coated in a very thin layer of glass – your mind too would begin to consume itself. You too would see chandeliers in the tops of trees and hear the voices of what you begin to believe are Scandinavian politicians emanating from the empty spaces on either side of the river. The line of reasoning that leads to this conclusion seems clear and consistent enough to convince you of the inevitable truth of the hallucination, but there is something missing. A card with no names on it.

Merely a pen and ink rendering of the sun. The inner harmony one experiences when the outside world is conducive to the continued existence of all who inhabit it. I pull the johnboat to shore finally believing that the house on the hill is calling my name, or someone inside it is and to continue downriver would be tantamount to admitting my name no longer belongs to me, that I am no longer worthy of this or any other name because I no longer recognize them. After successfully maneuvering the muddy stretches stitched loosely with cattails and the footprints of any other creature that did so beforehand and then suffered its inglorious fate, I approach the house with a trepidation like that you might feel when the violins and the violas are sawing away at deliberate speed and you can't tell where that sound is coming from, where it originates. Perhaps the musicians have secreted themselves away in a nearby dwelling and have left the door to it partially open so that the soundtrack they produce is still audible to anyone standing outside the dwelling, but they can't be seen themselves unless one finds the proper angle, something within a range of, say, two or three degrees and available only to those who are feeling particularly adventuresome. Risking splinters and certainly worse injuries still, they would have to clamber up a pile of castoff planks and bits

and pieces of dried shrubbery and other debris stacked up outside the entrance to the dwelling by whoever abandoned it due to economic woes or a violent threat by the neighbors some fifty to one hundred years ago -- this being the best estimate of anyone with a keen eye for architectural detail and a familiarity with the rich oral history of the region in question.

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Blank slates don't exist. Only canvases with lots of contours, places where colors can hide, where bits of sand and grit and cast-off fragments of skin can accumulate. Be careful, then, when examining why you do what you do, your hidden motives and hobbyhorses. They just might turn out to be treacherous, but not in the way steep hillsides are treacherous or the way wild servals are treacherous when you keep them in a cage. Instead they can cause respiratory distress months and even years after the event. They can bring you to your knees and leave you there as if they had struck you with a blunt object. Our capacity to endure pain is trebled in the process but this still leaves it far below the crucial threshold and causes a great deal of amusement among the other life forms that share our planet with us, the round worms and the amoeboids, in particular, who you

wouldn't ordinarily consider the sorts of beings capable of mirth. But here again, we have been undone by our own nearsightedness, our tendency to ask questions only after they have become obvious, after the answers to them have become as crucial to our survival as does a canteen of water should we find ourselves afoot in the desert wastes east of Cathedral City. I admire the sharp edges, the desire to make everything within the work seem related to everything else if only by virtue of the fact that all parts of it are similar in appearance and possess angles of more than forty degrees. The work itself seems to float about three feet off the ground, but this, of course, is an illusion, something those charged with its installation had to figure out how to do for themselves because the work did not – so the rumor goes – come with instructions. In fact, no one ordered it, no one had any idea it was on its way. Its arrival caught the entire staff off guard. As a consequence, its creator is not credited. No one knows who its creator might be. The museum's curator doesn't seem to have been comfortable with the designation of "anonymous" either for reasons that may have something to do with the curator's scholarly background, the procedures he learned and adopted while studying overseas. Or it may simply be a matter of not wishing to offend anyone by making assumptions about its

creator's intentions, his or her desire to remain out of the picture, on the sidelines, as it were, when the whole world has decided in the meantime to come gawking, has decided the work is the very emblem of everything they have ever found wanting at the center of their barely tolerable existences, everything they have ever wanted so strongly they could taste that wanting, that longing, in their mouths like a sprig of parsley wedged between the teeth.

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A woman stands at the side of the house, hoeing a path of earth yellowed by whatever is coming up out of it and whistling to herself. Her hands are big around as catcher's mitts and her skirt is long and raisin-colored with patterns that remind me of the cryptic markings on the tarmac at the airport. The circuitous route seems most favorable to catching her attention without in the process startling her, but I learned ages ago to be direct especially when you are unsure of the outcome. Better to find your way by the light of the sun than to quibble with hand-drawn maps of the sort that turn up here and there in the marketplace and promise to lead you to wealth and riches beyond your wildest dreams. But usually just get you lost in the desert. Assuming, of course, there is an expanse of land in the



vicinity dry enough to deserve that name. To beckon to spiders and mites and little else besides those creatures that intend to consume them if they can survive the conditions. Sometimes, if you sit still long enough, directly under the sun, or even at an angle, these creatures will begin to speak to you as if you had landed somehow in the middle of a fable. What they say is determined, of course, by the needs of the plot, but if you do away with the plot altogether, so as to free up your fable to become some other, more respectable art form, you'd be surprised by what the little collared lizards, in particular, might say. They have a way of capturing the complexities of all non-human life as lived on our planet in the perfect phrase or bon mot. They make apt and thoughtful allusion to Shakespeare, a knowledge of which they must necessarily have come to secondhand. Someone in a window on the upper floor notices my approach and begins not so much to scream as to yodel a welcome which serves, you can tell by the tone of it -- by the volume and urgency -- as a warning as well to her companion tending the patch of earth. When this woman turns, it is with hoe held high above her head, the dirt-stained blade quivering a moment as if it is so anxious to plunge itself deep inside my head it can barely contain itself. If it had lips, it would smile, but only because a smile

at this point would be the cold-blooded thing to do. A semi-reptilian acknowledgement that something unfortunate is about to happen and there is nothing I can do to stop it.

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The brochure makes mention of the lake as if it were something to bore others with on your death bed, something to paint or explore come Tuesday when you have nothing else to do. When the highways are emptying out and you can't figure out why. We listen to the advice of the red-headed woman in the too-tight spandex pants but secretly, inside, we are telling her what we think. We are listing the reasons why the lines around her eyes remind us of home, why the scent she wears during the day ought to be forbidden. I like the idea of saving your best ideas for the boat trip over because that way you will have something other than French poetry to keep yourself occupied. You will have limits placed on you by the atmosphere itself, which is full of flying insects suddenly and has a tendency to aggressively refract sunlight even when it's getting close to evening and the light is growing scarce. If no one else is going to acknowledge my presence, though, I am just as likely to start singing. The songs don't have to defuse the situation, but it's nice when they do. It makes everyone

sleep better. In my back pockets, small grains of unidentifiable material vie for space with the air itself and when I stick my fingers in absently (when I am speaking to the red-headed woman for example and I don't know what to do with my hands – I don't want them flapping about in front of me like recently beached fish), this material sticks to the flesh on the ends of my fingers and refuses to disengage until I run my fingers under hot water in the sink. There is a lesson in there somewhere, a physics lesson, no doubt, concerning surface tension and how there doesn't actually have to be a surface involved for you to experience the tension. But I am getting so sick of learning things without trying, I don't insist on sharing this knowledge with those who otherwise might benefit from it. The people standing around in the hallways when I come and go, those smoking their miniature glass pipes and muttering invectives at me under their breath. The delivery drivers trying forever to turn left. We can't imagine a more mundane existence than the one we have been blessed with at any given moment, and yet, just try to take it away, try to snatch it up like a coin from off the table and listen to the way we complain! Listen to the vehemence with which we insist we were only daydreaming for a moment. We are now going to turn our attention unfailingly to those things

that matter -- that separate us once and for all from the monkeys and the marmosets who (I suppose as a result of this particular announcement, or one very similar to it made within the hour) are even now turning back flips in their cages.

\*

The eyes, you can tell at a glance, are unseeing, blind as if they had been sculpted from sand. There are days when you begin to wonder if your eyes are the only functioning pair in the cosmos, and if this is the case, will that be sufficient to order the cosmos in just this fashion and no other? With the mountains worn away by time like the teeth at the back of the mouth? Those designed for grinding. Or if designed is not quite the proper term, perhaps "sculpted" will do. "Molded" if by this you mean the same process as turns stone perfectly round when caught in a natural depression at the bottom of a river. I know at least thirteen individuals with a last name closely associated with northern climates, with people at the helm of vessels made of cured walrus hides strung across a framework of local wood, most likely birch. And strange green lights moving across the night sky at a leisurely pace just as if they are not entirely convinced they are made of light after all -- down at the core where

the vital parts are rumored to lie -- that maybe they are instead an amalgam of cruelty and ennui. A masculine entity turned feminine, or vice versa, I forget. The front door is already open and I walk in ahead of my silent companion with the hoe still poised above her head. The thought of fleeing crosses my mind but I am not interested in it, much the way you can turn down the most alluring offers from people who do not appeal to you for entirely banal or obscure reasons. The way their mouths tilt to one side or the other when they speak. Their habit of guiding every conversation toward the trip they took once to Thailand. I'd like to think the nights are not as dark as they are going to seem from this point forward, that the unguents and salves we have concocted over long centuries to soothe the blistered skin are relevant to the discussion even if only because they contain secret ingredients the list of which might terrify us should we ever manage to get our hands on it. Human bone would no doubt be included. As well as the stuff inside it -- the marrow -- which is, they say, the color of rust but only when it comes into contact with oxygen. Your guess is as good as mine as to what color it might be in the meantime. If, that is, it can be said to be any color at all when it is hidden away from view like that in a body that relies on the marrow's brittle container -- our

long bones and our short -- to keep it from crumpling into a quivering, shapeless mass.

\*

What we call remote control works by keeping you in the distance, by making you a mere memory of what you were before its introduction. It borrows its aura from the soothsayers and the cretins living in the hills, mixing up potions from whatever berries they can find and the abundant sulfur water that bubbles to the surface. I jump higher than I have ever jumped after consuming some of it, but the height still isn't all that impressive. You could stack two entire lengths of it one on top of the other in a suitcase and still have room left over for your socks. It's possible, though, our despair is caused entirely by the body and the demands it makes on us in the form of desire for other bodies and the simple matter of moving from one place to another. Which turns out, on closer inspection, not to be a simple matter at all, but a vast and complex interaction of parts and chemicals no two of which can safely be reproduced under laboratory conditions. This is probably just as well, because if you could reproduce them, if you could turn these interactions loose on themselves, you would quickly run out of space and be forced to lease

additional facilities, not to mention having to witness a proliferation of blind will and agony not seen since the days of the Spanish Armada. Something unwelcome precisely because of the historical connotations. When I am twisting the knobs, I expect some sort of response – a change in the frequency of the sound that is being emitted or increase in illumination in the room if that room has been wired properly and if it contains works of art that people no longer pay money to view but which they retain a memory of sometimes fifty and sixty years after the initial viewing. The explanations for this extraordinary recall, as you can imagine, run the gamut from an instinctual pairing of the object viewed with the loved one sharing the experience to esoteric theories involving the shaping of the intellect by the willful or emotional distortion of time. What we would today call the manic state become permanent and all-absolving. But of course we don't know what we are talking about. We have never actually studied this in any reputable academic setting and when we try to register for classes that might cover it, we find there are no classes offered, only a few marginally-related seminars with titles so ornate in their terminology, we begin to wonder if maybe they aren't really titles at all but secret codes intended to warn the previously initiated away. To encourage them to meet

instead at the Denny's across the street where they can proceed to do whatever it is they do – maybe even expand and replicate the universe, or, conversely, shut it down completely -- from the large booth in the corner.

\*

*Dull flashes illuminate the night sky about half a mile away, continue for at least five minutes and are then followed by a darkness so intense people begin to wonder out loud whether or not the planet has stopped moving. Whether it has dropped precipitously from its previous place into a void long suspected to rest just beneath the planet (if terms like “above” and “beneath” hold any meaning whatsoever in a place with no up and no down, a place without any quantifiable boundaries whatsoever) but never before confirmed due to a lack of imagination by those who send probes and other mechanical devices into orbit. Who see there what they want to see, which is usually some version of themselves, albeit without the glasses, without the barely perceptible gleam in the cornea of the eye. Eulalie dons her favorite feathered mask and makes her way from the portico to the land with no trees and draws on a cigarette long and slow as if trying to emphasize a point she has been too timid previously to state. This is the thing about Eulalie*



*that makes me a little bit impatient, a little bit angry, but only the way you get angry at the weather sometimes when it doesn't behave the way you think it should. You know it is irrational to do so, but attempting to withhold or repress that emotion will only succeed in creating greater difficulties – changing speech patterns, for instance. Intestinal distress. The lisping plays a factor in whatever happens next, and we often have to tell ourselves that whichever words get spoken are probably not the same words that mean anything, that actually tell us anything of value when it comes to things like who is in our corner and who is determined to avoid corners altogether because they leave you very few viable options for escape. When I cave in to the pressure, when I decide finally to set out in pursuit just as, of course, she desires me to – because why else all this over-the-top posing and tacky melodrama, why else the sound of cranes far away in the night sky like dreams? – Eulalie is choking. Not with emotion, certainly, and not as a result of her being exposed to noxious substances for perhaps the first and only time in her storied life, but because she has failed to take into account the size of certain food items relative to the size of the opening in her throat. Something must be done, and I do it, but I am not proud of myself afterward. I do not repeat the story over*

*and over again as others are wont to do when they wish to make themselves the center of attention. When they wish those around them to take note of how extraordinary they are even when they are (as, when it comes right down to it, all of us are in actual fact), as ordinary as a plain brown seed pod in a field full of seed pods.*

\*

The meal is an unidentifiable fowl, miniature birds laid out upside down on plates the color of plums. The woman, Beulah, puts down her hoe and invites me to occupy the chair opposite hers in a dining room about the size of a boxcar and decorated with portraits of what I take to be ancient family members, though guessing in this instance is probably just as risky as flight. It sends you down a winding mountain path on either side of which you may eventually expect cannibals. Or people dressed like what both you and they imagine cannibals must dress like, including of course dried grasses placed strategically about the body and arm bands made of copper. With designs etched into them by hand or machine, it's always difficult to determine which with the naked or untrained eye. Even the trained eyes sit in the sockets of heads that must, on occasion, forget whatever training has been drilled into them in the past and

proceed according to the emotions which possess a formidable wisdom of their own. It's when you combine the two, when you allow the one to incubate the other, that you create an environment conducive to the spinning of tales that have no teller and so do not qualify, according to standard definitions, as narrative proper but instead fall under that most coveted of all categories, the uncategorical. They seem to engender themselves out of nothing the way salamanders are said to appear in the mud after a conflagration, a natural torching of the forest by lightning strike or even (so long as it is not too extensive) lava flow. The two of us are served by her idiot son, the hulking youth who watched my approach from the window and warned Beulah in a voice that still hangs in the air as if it were more properly an aroma. When not fetching further delicacies from some unseen kitchen, he stands in the corner with his arms dangling petulantly at his sides and his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth. Any attempt to make eye contact is met with a grunt like that you might expect of a loved one sleeping when you ask a question directly into her ear. This is almost immediately followed by a confession of some sort, though you must possess the key to the arcane language it is uttered in to be able to comprehend what exactly is being said.

Unfortunately this key, of course, is available only in your own sleep and your own dreams where it inevitably sits idle -- it goes to waste -- because you do not need it in that particular universe. You are fluent the moment you arrive.

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What we tell each other in moments of crisis comes flooding back two or three days later when the crisis has dried up, when the concept of time itself has abandoned us to our own devices. It shrinks to about half its size and if you go looking for it, you must adjust your expectations accordingly. When I try to accomplish the same thing by examining a candle flame through a magnifying glass, the pain is so severe, it reminds me of the time I fell down a flight of stairs and there was no one there to minister to my wounds. I was as alone as if I had woken up at the south pole. We like to think our trajectory is something that can be mapped. To prove the point we frequently produce oversized pieces of paper and point to certain parts of them as if to signify that is where we are located at any given moment and that we will be located somewhere else shortly. But don't bother to get out the instruments that link these places together. The rulers and the felt-tip pens. There is no time for that. And even if there were, you'd just

come up with some random design we wouldn't recognize. A parabola, say, with its center of gravity disturbed by the fact that there is no gravity in that place where parabolas exist. That theoretical place full of dots and lines to connect them and a whole lot of nothing in between. Perhaps I am being too technical. I have this bad habit of explaining things I do not understand and ignoring those I do. I probably picked this up from my brother who was older than I, and so prone to ridiculing my every decision even when that decision was sound. When it might have resulted in my getting the girl, for instance, or at least impressing her with my ability to make a decision and stick to it, impressing sufficiently enough, I suppose, for her to hang around a while just to see what might happen. Of course, my brother was flesh and blood and held that against me as well, accusing me of adopting an outer oval covering of calcium – a shell, in other words -- just to try to embarrass him, to “one up him”, as it were, just when he was starting to come into his own. When he was starting to understand the difference between the carburetor and whatever other parts and structures you are liable to run across in an internal combustion engine as you are trying to take it apart. When he was just starting to think his life might not wind up being a nearly endless series of events after all,

with no means of determining how they are related, how they are connected one to the other outside of the perhaps entirely coincidental fact that he is present bodily whenever such events occur.

\*

We are dealing here with a concept belonging to that category of concepts that has a name in Greek we haven't gotten around to translating properly yet. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we don't know Greek, but it could also be because we have yet to realize the full implications of the concepts themselves, of what will occur once we take them down off the shelf and let them loose on the world. We discover then that the serial nature of every event will lead some to cluck their tongues disparagingly. This doesn't mean we have to do the opposite. It doesn't mean we have to go around toasting everyone's health, but, of course, to refuse is going to earn us a reputation for poor breeding in certain company. A reputation for blaming other people for our own sins and then starting to believe it ourselves. Beulah is recounting a past visit to the chiropractor where she claims the walls were covered in dollar bills and when she attempted to make small talk, the others in the waiting room lowered their eyes to their shoes and shifted about

nervously in their chairs as if she had pulled a revolver from beneath her skirt. That she was, in fact, concealing a revolver beneath her skirt should not have mattered, nor should it have induced such a reaction unless some of her fellow patients were possessed of extraordinary powers of intuition like those that lead most of us to formulate some version of Zeno's paradoxes before we have ever even heard the name of Zeno. Once you have mastered the idea of fractions, you are already halfway there, so to speak. And then there is the little matter of the imagination of childhood which, in most instances, turns the physical world into a workshop, a funhouse and torture chamber all at once, without any prodding from the learned anthologies. Without any assistance from those who take great pleasure in breaking the experienced universe down into its component parts and then insisting that those parts too must be divided, and so on, ad infinitum. I think Beulah's monologue unendurably dull and the fowl excellent, possessing something close to the flavor of those nights when you stay awake for hours, not because you can't sleep, but because you refuse to. Because the agony of putting sleep off one more second multiplies itself and soon all of existence is an amalgam and parade of pain and ecstasy and half-dreams with no end in sight, something

leaving us with no reasonable hope of (and, perhaps as a consequence, no desire for) escape.

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I must take certain sounds back, must retrieve them from whoever held me enchanted when I first heard them – the dull ring of a brass bell or the throb of a propeller moving through the air. This is something I have promised myself so as to avoid sinking someday beneath the weight of everything that belongs to other people, or belongs to my interaction with them, particularly if that interaction had something to do with the flesh of the thigh or, more accurately, the renaming of the flesh of the thigh to something less clinical sounding, something more personal, like the “*tabula rasa*.” We love complication so long as it functions like oregano, so long as it doesn’t make us wish we had spent the day in bed as we had originally intended. Thumbing through out-of-date newspapers, hoping to find in previously overlooked passages information about the other people who happen to live on our block, or the coming of the circus, which can not help but be of interest now that we are old enough to purchase tickets for ourselves. I think sometimes I will spend the rest of my life longing to inhabit a moment that happened toward the very



beginning, when everything was still in flux and nothing was certain. There was no way of determining which moments were of value because they all came and went so quickly. And let's be honest, our judgment when we are younger is judgment, really, in name only. It actually more accurately resembles knee-jerk decision making of the most irresponsible sort. Tossing colored stones onto the ground and trying to discern a pattern. Saying the opposite of whatever has been uttered just moments before. This is why it's probably best if I simply accept what has been given to me by fate as if fate were an actual thing. As if you could see its outlines in the mirror if you were standing in the other room and you just happened to glance in that direction. Of course, should you insist on examining the mirror more closely, on going into the room to search in the closet and behind the door for whatever it was that had been reflected, you would most likely be confronted with nothing. Why? Because fate finds bald curiosity of this sort anathema. It thwarts it at every corner. And who can blame it? Some things you just shouldn't know, some things you just shouldn't see. These are rules that have been established for our benefit and we violate them at our own peril. The moment we turn our backs on them, the moment we decide it's better that they had never been formulated

in the first place, we find we occupy a world so perilous and primeval and odd we have no way to give it so much as a name. We run entirely dry of appropriate designations.

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When my eyesight begins to waver and the head on my neck seems terribly heavy suddenly as if containing the essential substance of some other head, I reach for the pills in my coat pocket, the yellow ones in particular which have never yet let me down. But Beulah waves the idiot over to intercept the palm of my hand before it can reach my mouth. Objection is the lingua franca of the obtuse and poorly-oriented, but sometimes it is a necessary entertainment. It reminds us of the days when we reached barely to the headmistresses' knees and yet there was an aura of invincibility we wore around our shoulders then like a mink. We spoke up in unison and the drapes were pulled aside, however briefly, to allow us a glimpse of the planets wheeling about in the night sky overhead. Of course, this recollection is no doubt faulty as the planets were large and crystal clear like mountains when you are standing on the summit of a mountain and gazing contentedly at its nearby twin. Still, the memory is a living thing and for this we are thankful when we remember to be, when we are saluting

the memory and other incarnate attributes with a glass of absinthe and our feet are already tingling with yet another onset of gout. I have no idea if the idiot consumed the pills himself or if he merely knocked them to the floor or if Beulah commanded this interference because she was insulted by the sudden lack of interest in her tales. For my part, I had already entered a place so full of darkness I immediately suspected it was artificial and refused to grant it any legitimacy. I skulked in the corner as if someone could certainly see me and would understand what this gesture meant. I mention the incident only so as to convince the reader it was the fowl which had been tampered with, laced with whatever nightshade the two of them were in the habit of relying on to immobilize their victims. I know there are those who will accuse me of tampering with my own consciousness on this particular occasion because they know I have done so on almost every other. But I think we rely on patterns entirely too much when it comes to human behavior. Why not just let the image of the lightning strike take its place for a month or two and see what happens? Why not just admit your time will be better spent and the investigations that follow will inevitably yield results that you were not looking for and so did not expect. Maybe they will even make sense after all the other factors have been

added in. The Mediterranean flavor of the background music. The constant drip of water threatening to form ornate stalagmites in the distant future on what's left of your kitchen floor.

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Expect to court disaster twelve times before you learn your lesson. At least that's how it was explained to me. I don't pay attention to advice unless it comes from someone with close-cropped auburn hair. This happens so rarely, though, you might almost say I have no real guidance at all. You might even claim I make things up as I go along. A real lone wolf. A sage without so much as a balcony to stand on, or under. But you'd be wrong. At any rate, I tried to follow this particular nugget of wisdom, even had it engraved on a pocket watch I carried around with me so as to be able to tell what time it was at a moment's notice. But I failed, as I almost always do. Sometimes I wonder why I bother attempting anything at all. Fly fishing. Listening to music originally composed in China. Trying to decipher where each section ends and another begins. Maybe there are no sections, maybe everything is supposed to bleed into everything else and we are just supposed to absorb it in enormous, indigestible chunks. But even here the language

gets in the way: you can't have chunks without boundaries, without some way of distinguishing where each chunk gives way to another, where the sky and the trees and the clouds insist on their own autonomy and therefore throw a wrench (or something very like a wrench) into the whole procedure. I find myself in a conversation with no ready means of extricating myself. We stand at the juncture of two important roadways so the traffic is fairly heavy and it makes a noise like outsized animals snoring. In between words, between my hesitant attempts to make sense of those words as they come my way one at a time, I think perhaps I shouldn't always be wishing to escape conversations with other people, that I have been very lonely lately and maybe participating more actively in conversations such as this one might relieve some of that loneliness at least temporarily. Certainly that's how it used to work, when I was younger and I hadn't heard people say yet the things they will inevitably say to me now whenever they begin speaking. I hadn't solidified at the center like a hunk of bauxite. But the harder I try to pay attention, to participate and even work up the courage to respond, the less anything Beulah says makes sense. When I latch onto her sentences, when I attempt to turn them over appreciatively and take them in, they disintegrate. I feel a

panic like that which sets in when the structure you are standing on begins to tilt to one side. At first, you think everything will be fine, that whatever is causing the structure to lean will rectify itself of its own accord. That the structure will find a place of equilibrium and everything will go back to the way it was before -- with the sun just going down in the distance behind some trees and the other people standing on the structure with you discussing a little light politics and what goes into the making of the perfect martini. All the while. they look each other up and down in wanton appraisal before the aforementioned leaning (which does not, incidentally, right itself, does not lessen its angle and acceleration in any way, but in fact increases both at an alarming rate) encourages them to start screaming.

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Central to the idea of bathos is one involving enlightenment, and it has always been so -- the two out strolling, gathering flowers and other organic materials together, hand-in-hand, for more than two thousand years. Though you have to wonder what the relationship was like prior to that, if one or the other even existed at all. Today we are grown complacent in our certainty that we have all but mastered the finer points and are simply buffing the

extremities and accoutrements to a high gloss. We are saying our prayers in a mock solemn fashion because we think prayers something old-fashioned and slightly ridiculous, like enormous lizards with horns on their heads stomping clumsily about on a modern expressway. The reverberations reach our ears after they have reached the ears of other people with less-than-pleasant plans in their heads, with ideas that involve turning all ideas into mere shadows of themselves. Brief notes and commentary of the sort that make us wonder what all the fuss was about when they were first penned by men in the habit of wearing outsized curly wigs on their heads (even, I like for some reason to imagine, when they shed the rest of their clothing and climbed into bed). I sense a shift coming on, one that causes the hair on my forearms to stand straight up but leaves that on the back of my neck unaffected, as if there were two separate components and each is unaware of the existence of the other. The only way to join them again, to undermine this dichotomy, is to peel some fruit and take the rinds and grind them into a fine powder and then mix that powder in with a pre-determined amount of sulfur and saltpeter and see what happens. Probably it will blow up in your face and disfigure you, but who knows? Maybe the almanacs are correct when they predict something less

dramatic. Something akin to snowfall without the wholesome associations that might otherwise convince us we are living our lives properly when we know, in fact, deep down inside our bodies, where such knowledge is apt to generate itself from the simple warmth and movement of our blood, that we have done things we should not have done. And when those things reach the light of day, when they are discovered by those who share our lives with us, who sometimes wipe the dried mustard from the corners of our mouths and speak to us in their sleep from that place where they are dreaming, we can be certain a new regimen is forthcoming. We can be certain a sparse and lonely existence – a veritable tundra – awaits. But, not to worry. We can get used to that too. We can get used to just about anything so long as it involves the body or the mind, one at a time. If they are both mixed up in it together, however, there is little hope. You might as well start walking in any direction whatsoever and plan on stopping only when something immovable stands in your way. And there is, of course, nothing in the whole wide universe that can't be shifted, however slightly, from one place to another just by our looking at it, by our holding it carefully in our gaze.

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When I've lost consciousness, I occupy a world full of winged creatures, but I can't make out the exact construction or organization of their bodies – where the face is, whether they have hands or claws or some other feature as yet to be identified by natural science or the empirical arts. I can only be certain of the existence of the wings because of the tell-tale sound they make as they pass by overhead, and also because there is a certain logic that accompanies our drug-induced visions which says a thing is whatever the vision proclaims it to be and then we are compelled to believe it because the logic says so. It is very similar to axiomatic geometry in this regard and brings me back to a time when I was just under six feet tall and those who passed me in the street tended to look back at me aghast but I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it had to do with the tooth I had intentionally knocked out of my mouth with a hammer. I could go into the reasons I had for doing this (and believe me – they were compelling at the time, involving desire and love and strict rules as to how that love could be expressed and by whom), but they seem unconvincing now, to say the least, as surely anything must once it has been uttered more than two or three times in a row. It's very like an image you pass repeatedly through a copy machine or the sound of your own voice played back to you from a

recording device when you are expecting to hear nothing more alien or jarring than some Brahms on the radio. Not because you are particularly fond of Brahms, but because it has been a while since you last heard any and the law of averages applies even when you are not discussing life and death circumstances but simply what might come out of a box with a dial on it. I should like to be able to bottle the experience I have before I wake up, to capture it once and for all in a pill you can carry around in your pocket and pop down your throat when the weather is turning sour or the discussion around the dinner table is just the sort of thing to make you wish, for the thousandth time, that you had never started a family to begin with, that your sperm or ovarian cells had dried up in their housing and you had been left free to wander the countryside enjoying the blissful silence or near silence the natural world revels in when it is devoid of all people. But then, aren't there kingfishers chattering in the tree limbs by the river? And doesn't your heart make a very distracting sound when it is doing whatever it must do to keep itself from giving up, from joining the rocks scattered about on the ground at your feet in their glorious -- and, of course, lengthy -- imperturbability?

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*On the cover of Hayman's Proust, something miniscule has just moved. Something so small as to suggest it is not really there at all has diverted my attention away from where I had originally intended to aim it, namely in the general direction of the standing water out the window. Or maybe the stray piece of cardboard poised to turn circles beyond that. We can strain our senses to the breaking point and still not retrieve the information we desire or understand the information we do manage to retrieve, but this doesn't mean we are fated to stay locked up inside our own minds forever like actors no one remembers the names of anymore wandering around inside black and white films. It does mean, however, that any attempt to break free, to escape our original bondage is likely to appear to others desperate and pathetic. Akin to trying on pants two sizes too small. Or walking down the middle of a side street, all but daring the occasional car or lumber truck (the driver of which is, no doubt, lost and in danger of receiving a citation) that happens by to continue in a straight line as if you weren't walking there. As if you were in no danger. Even Eulalie counsels restraint and her throat is more supple than mine, her hearing so acute as to suggest she hasn't aged a day in more than twenty years. She keeps a room at the very top of the tower now, or so I have been informed by those who*

*claim to visit it at regular intervals. Their reports are not to be trusted. For one thing, they contradict each other, one recalling a thick sable blanket on the bed, another recalling no bed at all but a hammock fastened loosely at either end into the wall. Sometimes (as is the case with Eulalie, now grown so mythical as to seem something that should be made of marble rather than flesh and blood or whatever it is she is actually made of) when anxiety finds us and we haven't been looking for it, and we haven't been trying to avoid it either, the sound it makes is very like someone regaling a crowd around a fire with tales that have no beginning and no end, that seem almost to spin themselves into being out of the very light itself and the surrounding darkness, and maybe too the soil underneath, which is damp and full of rotting plant matter and millipedes. Eulalie explains that there are only two ways of ascending the ladder she sends down. Neither of them is obvious, neither lends itself to what we like to call intuition or common sense because we have no better term for the state in question. We don't even have time to memorize the faulty terms, to put them to practical, if imprecise, use. When I am at the bottom rung looking up, the fear courses through my body like conger eels in the shallows around some uninhabited island. It makes me wish I had never set eyes on Eulalie all*

*those years before, wandering alone on the desiccated plains of the llano Estacado. Or was it in a courtroom? No matter. It's time to start climbing, time to place one hand above the other and repeat the process until such time as it no longer seems like a conscious process at all but is rather something accomplished solely through instinct -- like breathing or perspiring or conjuring up the shadowy niches and seldom-seen corners of one's old childhood home when one is deep in the act of dreaming.*

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The ambience of the sepulcher greets me as soon as I come to, rushes in headlong like a herd of buffalo and I think for a moment that I am still unconscious, but the dull throb at my temples tells me that the phenomenal world and its inevitable suffering have found me again and it will be a while before I am granted the privilege of visions again, if only because that which we find benign, even joyous must be offset by its opposite now and then so that we don't wind up succumbing, just giving into the sweet and heavenly and deciding never to move our limbs again. I mean, what's the point then? Some will tell you to share the secret with others, with those who are still searching, but it's entirely possible the primary ingredient – that which

makes this joy possible at all – is the secrecy within which it is housed. And when you burst the membrane, you destroy the very thing you wished to communicate to others, to share with them the way you share venereal diseases (when you have them) or your passion for old stamps. Which is to say with a crooked smile on your lips and an excuse cooked up already in your brain. Your brain is no doubt fevered in any case and so has nothing better to do with its time than to visualize vistas, entire countries spreading out before you on the alluvial plane that takes its name from the first European to set eyes on it. And by the way, what have you discovered? Who will be able to distinguish between you and the person sitting on the subway across from you seventy years from now when neither one of you will be here to explain things the way they need to be explained – that is to say with telling detail and the apt illustration drawn from life and not the print encyclopedia which is at least a generation now out of date. The pain in my head is quickly replaced by that at my wrists where (I deduce because it is dark and I can not see, and at any rate my hands are located now behind my body) I have been secured to the floor by some sort of metallic restraints and each time I move or try to shift position, the restraints bite deeper into the flesh of my wrists. As a consequence, I

decide pretty quickly a passive approach to my predicament is to be preferred, at least for the time being, until I can determine for myself where I am and what is happening and why there is the sound of water splashing against a hard surface somewhere close by but I can not see the water or the surface against which it splashes or even, for that matter, my own my lower legs and feet stretched out somewhere in front of me on a very cold dirt floor.

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One begins to trust the overhead electric lights will not go out without reason in the middle of one's speech on parsimony and the inflated value of friendship. And whatever reason is forthcoming may be filed away under a number of categories. Smoke and mirrors. Latex facsimiles of prominent organs. I try to back my way out of the situation by nodding politely and looking those closest to me directly in the eye, but everyone has his own favorite method. If I were to stop and consider each based solely on its merits, or those things that strike us as meritorious simply because they begin with the letter "D" and they have an aura about them like that which besets epileptics just before the fit, I would be here until next Tuesday and the animals wouldn't get fed. They'd turn to bones and

ligaments almost overnight, that's how high their metabolism is! This suggests they are not animals in the ordinary sense of that term and so therefore can not be considered native to this continent (we will forego, for the moment, consideration of further outliers – planets and stars and galaxies). They must have been delivered from some other continent and whoever did the delivering thought he'd get one over on us. That which was delivered mimics the body type and various temperaments of our favorite species so closely no one but an expert would be able to tell the difference. Of course, you don't have to be an expert to recognize something is amiss when the hairs on the back of your arms stand straight up while those on the back of your neck remain relatively inert. Some suggest this means they are not wired properly. But you know better than to take such claims at face value because someone once told you claims are the life blood of all knowledge and therefore that which must be spilled before someone else can succeed in tampering with them, before someone manages to soak them in the semantic equivalent of soap, say -- or a mixture equal parts resin and gravel, in its odor and texture -- and then sends them somewhere so far away your only hope of ever seeing them again would be to get in your car and just start driving and vow never to



stop until you had reached a place that hadn't been given its name yet. At any rate, not one we'd recognize as possessing the qualities one normally associates with a name. Like the ability to distinguish the person or object it is attached to from any other persons or objects it is not attached to. Or reminding us of a time in the past when we were so caught up in the existence of another, we had begun to believe there might not be any more room left inside for that entity we had until very recently thought of habitually as ourselves.

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*Under the bottom drawer, fastened to the particle board like a remora, you'll find a large envelope with two thousand dollars in cash in it and a handgun that doesn't work. Because someone dropped it into the pond and when he fished it out again the damage had been done. Even his reputation was never quite the same again, taking on hues of foppishness and self-recrimination that don't attract members of the opposite sex. They don't always repel them either, but the pathways have diverged and when you are forced to choose, how do you make that decision? Which criterion takes primacy of place and how do you identify it from among so many others of its cousins? Eulalie pours the*

*coffee out on the ground and takes apart the Styrofoam cup and examines the patterns in the stains on the inside as if she believes they will tell her what the rest of the world has not been able to. Namely, why she can't ever feel fully fleshed out and solid instead of like some entity composed primarily of gauze and left to float about on the currents of air that hang close to the surface of the Earth because they are afraid of being swallowed up, of being absorbed completely in the more forceful currents circulating higher up in the atmosphere should they decide to head in that direction. For no particular reason (what you might, if you were feeling generous, term an "accident") or because they consider their own situation too modest to continue. We are never satisfied with staying put until we reach the age of -- I don't know -- what's my current age? Even that bit of retrenching will undoubtedly send shivers down Eulalie's spine because she thinks age the thing that ruins all, that lays a patina of disease over the entire universe and keeps it from being the sort of thing you might comfortably keep in your pocket. Like a quarter. But when you ask her how old she is, she changes the subject so abruptly you think maybe she is auditioning for a role. She is trying to take the spotlight with her into the bottom of whichever cave it is she claims to reside in during the day. To keep track of these*

*exaggerations, the evasions and out-and-out mythmaking, I have purchased a notebook full of ruled paper and I jot them down after she has uttered them, but not immediately because I don't want her getting suspicious. I wait until later in the evening, when I am alone and the coyotes are talking to me from outside. They are calling to me from the dry spaces between my house and the highway, spaces where the dead weeds are chest-high and a strange dark scarlet in color in the moonlight, almost as if the weeds have been painted there by someone who wishes to demarcate a border, who wishes to say this is as far as you need to go, at least with your eyes.*

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The tones repeat themselves until the pattern you identify after enduring several cycles becomes something other than itself. It morphs into its own mirror-image, meaning something turned backward, headed in the wrong direction. And you can never be sure if this is due to the mind's inability to maintain its mastery over the input it receives or if that input -- the stimuli, the tones themselves -- must change because everything must change, must mutate when repetition is involved. Think of your own genetics, think of the childhood games involving speech and

secrecy and the desire to win favor among peers who considered you somewhat less than human. A water dish sits just within reach, though it is terribly painful on my shackled wrists when I try to bend over to take a drink. I hold out as long as I can but thirst is one of those things that drives the organism and you can no more ignore it at a certain point than you can ignore the sound of your own name when you are sleeping. It pulls you up from the darkness as if you were attached to it by a hook through the upper lip. I can hear whispering in other parts of the cellar and at first I think they must belong to those who placed me here in near total darkness, who affixed me in chains – Beulah and her idiot son – and I am afraid of the sound of these voices the way you are afraid of lightning before you do the mathematics involved in determining odds and emptiness, the way you are afraid of blood especially if it is your own. Though I have known someone in the past who found the sight of her own blood so alluring she would spend her evenings raking at her flesh with bits of broken bottle until someone pointed out that she was merely putting off until some indeterminate future point what could be hers the instant she threw the broken glass away. What this might have been no one bothered to say, but she understood by osmosis or analogy and from that point

forward you could find her, serpent-shaped scars and all, wiping down countertops with moist cloths and whistling tunes that had no real structure, that circled on themselves like mentally-ill crows and reminded those who heard them of the time in their own lives when the sound of someone else's voice, no matter what it was trying to accomplish, no matter what it was proclaiming or undoing or embroidering, could never be as compelling as their own.

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What if the shell, in this instance, serves a function contrary to that it ordinarily serves? What if, instead of protecting the fragile inner contents from the hostile outside world, this time it is designed to protect the outside world from whatever is contained within? I am beginning to suspect my position is not merely a matter of bad luck and worse timing; perhaps all of this has been planned and I am the victim of a brand of consciousness that, despite its being ultimately unidentifiable, remains consciousness for all that. That can not shake off its nature no matter how hard it tries. In this it is similar of course to yours truly, but this doesn't mean it is identical. Sometimes we imagine the contours of the cosmos follow the contours of the gray matter and any attempt to separate them will destroy both.

It is a symbiosis that allows for only one player and so seems, at first glance, a contradiction. Something to placate with mineral rich clay and puzzles, with soothing words that nevertheless suggest in combination a second meaning – a revaluation of all previous statements in the light of the final statement. I palpate different portions of the shell when I am otherwise unoccupied, sitting by myself with a glass of wine and listening to the radio for clues as to what is happening at the antipodes. I expect hollow sounds but usually receive something like that one makes when stubbing a toe, that involuntary exhalation so deep within the body as to suggest it didn't originate with that individual body but found its genesis in the mud of some far away swamp so removed in the dim past of the species as to seem entirely made up. Rendered from an artist's best educated guess and years of practice of the sort those of us less dedicated to our crafts can only imagine by closing our eyes and concentrating on a single, deeply upsetting image like a beloved pet struck lifeless at the side of the road or someone we know and consider ourselves to be on good terms with suddenly achieving spectacular success in his every endeavor while we are left to founder about just as lost and confused and ineffective as we have ever been. In this instance, we are left certain that the future, because it

has never been anything other than a rabid continuation of the present, something without imagination or mercy, will inevitably bring more of the same, and it this knowledge that leads to visions of such intensity as to suggest the brain has been damaged irrevocably, and that this damage -- the lesions and unseen scars, the consequent vivid hallucinations -- can't help but work to our advantage.

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The scheme, it turns out, involves the production of a narcotic batter that puts more workers in the cellar and ensures a never ending supply for Beulah and her progeny (of which, it is rumored, there are more than just the idiot son) who have, over the years, managed to develop an immunity to the active ingredient -- mulberry leaves chewed to a watery paste and then fermented. They remain awake and coherent while their guests descend into hours of unconsciousness, and so may be secured for slave labor. It is this batter that coats the fowl and makes it taste sublime, like nothing you've ever tasted before unless, of course, you've been a guest in this place and managed to escape, something that the other occupants and I fantasize about together over the next couple of days. Once we've gotten to know and trust each other, a task made the more

difficult by the absence of light and the manacles that keep me fast to the floor but which, the others assure me, will be removed before the week is out. It has happened to each of them in turn and none of them has been able to determine so far the reasons for her own release. Perhaps we are enslaved even when we think we are free to move about from one place to another, when we think we are riding our bikes, say, on a trail carved from the side of a mountain specifically for use by bicyclists and those who venture away from the town center because they don't like the idea of a center. They don't like the concept of that which is equidistant from everything else around it. It suggests a hierarchy, a right place to be and a wrong place to be, and limitations placed upon exactly who can enjoy this area and who can't. In this way value is bestowed and people are encouraged to take ownership of something that should (according to those formulating the theory) by rights belong to everyone equally the way sound waves, once let loose upon the air that contains them, belong to everyone in the vicinity so long as they have ears with which to hear them. I'm not convinced, though, that what we call freedom and what we picture in our heads when we use that term amount to the same thing. Or even that they should, consistency being the thing that limits freedom in both



concept and actuality as much as do iron bars or edicts of the sort despots are in the habit of issuing. Especially when they begin to sense that no one wants them around any more. No one feels the need for such heavy-handed protection as might have been warranted once upon a time when the surrounding precincts were full of bandits, but is no longer necessary now that they are filling up with tract housing and convenience stores that carry milk at inflated prices.

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*Each generation of the particular species of insect I have in mind lives only about thirty eight minutes, so those observing can determine the effects of any single mutation on an entire population within a day or two. They can then communicate this information to their peers via megaphone or fax machine. What ensues is a free-for-all very similar in appearance to those that take place when you toss a handful of cash down from a balcony onto a crowded floor of any sort. People come scurrying like crabs with their claws in the air and their mouths take on what appears to be a permanent grimace, at least from our vantage point standing above them, among the plastic ferns and the Modigliani prints. Certainly there are steps you can take to*

*prevent the situation from getting out of hand, but these are so numerous and so needlessly complicated it might work just as well to create a list of your own and then ignore it completely. When Eulalie feels an itch that is in reality not so much an itch as a circumscribed ache with no one in particular at the other end of it, she gives me a call and I come running, but in the meantime she has usually decided to vacate the premises and the rest of the evening becomes a game of guessing which way to turn and what phrase to call out into the darkness in hopes of getting her to respond. My money is almost always on some form of flattery, a lengthy commentary on the inverted V's of her cheek bones, the protuberances on other parts of her body as well and why they are so unique as to defy ordinary nomenclature. We will have to find new ways of referring to them by searching through a dictionary and selecting terms at random. The results will startle us into something like a coma, but only for a moment. Only for about 7 seconds, to be exact. After that we are as energetic again as if Eulalie herself has injected us with a syringe full of synthetic adrenaline. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to wake up next to her some mornings, the sun filtering in through the cheap muslin curtains, the sounds of bus traffic and the endless rounds of tennis played nearby finding their*

*way in through the cracks in the plaster, and under the front door where (in one scenario notable for its plausibility, for its evenhanded manner) someone is knocking so insistently I begin to wonder if maybe I am in danger. Whoever is out there doesn't seem content to take silence for an answer, which means, I suppose, he has some knowledge as to what is likely to have taken place here during his absence. Assuming, of course, he has been absent, he hasn't simply been lurking out there from the beginning hoping to gather evidence of both the audible and visual variety. And then do what with it? I wonder. Drop it in a drawer (or to be more precise – drop whatever medium has been used to contain that evidence, to store and preserve it for posterity) where the other evidence he has gathered over the years has been collecting dust and even warping the wood of the drawer there through its accumulated bulk? Which, of course, makes the drawer very difficult to open. Pretty soon – because one is never satisfied one has gotten to the bottom of any mystery, and so one continues to hunt up clues and further bits of flotsam and detritus for what amounts to an entire lifetime --- it will begin to seem as if the drawer has been permanently sealed shut.*

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The adventure in question generates itself from nothing more substantial than the cold sand under your feet and the nitrogen in the atmosphere. It breaks free of its containment, its purely physical barriers, like one of your more powerful animals at the zoo, and subsequently increases in size three or four fold. After a while, it must, of course, narrate itself into a corner, though this is not necessarily a negative thing as the corner is replete with odds and ends that remind one of potential emblems just waiting for someone capable of recognizing them as such and then deploying them appropriately. A discarded pair of brass knuckles. A tube of lipstick and a losing lottery ticket. I suggest we make of them a string of meaningful -- or at least eye-popping -- moments. A panorama heavy-handed except for the final frame which must be somewhat enigmatic because we wish to win a prize. And sure, we don't know where the judges come from, if they even speak the same language we do. In terms of structure or nuance or linking verbs. But at night, when I am sleeping and the insects gather outside my window and attempt to fill my dreams with their troubling, spastic visages, I come to realize it doesn't matter who is on your side and who is merely a step or two in front of you. All that matters is that the tendons in your hands and those that attach your feet

to your legs via the ankles have not been made brittle by age or dissolute living. They still function the way they were meant to, which is to say, at ninety-seven percent of the capacity of the other people in the room. Maybe the outcome is fixed, the decision made before there is even someone there to make a decision, before the first human brain has even come into existence what, a million years ago? On the savannah, but not the one you are thinking of. In fact, our definition of savannah is going to need a major overhaul if it is going to remain sufficient. It will need to include the concept of standing water at the corners where the vipers congregate and there exists a certain hushed undertone of despair like that you might expect at the end of the volleyball tournament when everyone has left the gymnasium and most of the lights have been turned out and you are sitting by yourself re-imagining the past twenty four hours, trying to determine how exactly you wound up here when you didn't know any of the players or anyone in the stands. And the best you can come up with is a theory having at its core the idea that the past is simply the one possible future that is no longer available to you. It has been eliminated from contention the way we steadfastly refuse to consider those who lose their hearts to us completely, who announce the fact of it in maudlin songs they compose

extemporaneously in the kitchen or on the back patio by themselves under a yellow moon.

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She emerges from the darkness piece by piece as if she were composed mostly of what we call memory, when we probably mean something else. I've never seen her before and memory is not something you can trust to hold such extraordinary pieces together. It misses stitches and falters, falls all over itself even when moving at a leisurely pace. Which is, truth be told, about all it can handle most of the time. The exceptions come when someone needs to be rescued from an underwater vessel or a cage, or when the lights are blinking at a frequency designed to induce seizures. The same frequency they have outlawed overseas because they are worried about what will happen to the future generations already among us. In the form of zygotes, I suppose. Or certain unfulfilled fantasies involving wraith-like entities that float about above our heads. It's not often we can contaminate that which hasn't happened yet, and when we are given the chance, we must embrace it. We must dial up the appropriate ritual from among a pool of such two thousand and more strong. The origins of most of these are obscure, but we can be certain they have

origins because everything must start somewhere. It can't simply will itself to be. Or, if it can, I imagine that counts too. She tells me her name is Anda as she moves in close, hovers before me and apologizes ahead of time for what she is going to have to do. I am not afraid. She seems conjured directly from the primeval, a paper-thin vision straight off the plains and my body reacts to the stimulus as it might to a sound that meant something two million years ago – a low rumble in the center of a mountain. The snapping of twigs in the forest twenty yards away. Anda carries a talc-yellow bowl in her hand, the bowl brimming with a substance, a paste smelling strongly of mulberry and what can only be described as halitosis, a rising up from the interior and a stagnating behind the teeth. She dips some of it from the bowl with a wooden spoon, sits down directly on my lap and slathers it over my lips and tongue. Without the fowl to soak it up, the concoction is overpowering and my head begins to swim immediately, Anda's coal-black eyes darting about in my vision like rodents with nowhere to go but still operating on an overwhelming instinct to avoid standing around in one place. They know doing so makes you an easy target and eventually even a myth of the sort that quickly gets replaced. A myth that instructed, at one time, countless souls in what it means to be a soul rather than

simply something animated by desire, but which now hangs out, biding its time, in the backs of old books in the library, the kind with broken spines.

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Each sphere acts as a container of some sort. You can see whatever it contains moving around inside it, shuddering and rolling, pushing against the sides in a desperate attempt to break free. The spheres are arranged in neat rows five and six deep along the banks of a stream, on the muddy part that rises higher than the rest of the surrounding earth and otherwise serves to keep the stream from regularly inundating the environs around it. The question naturally arises as to the nature of whatever placed the spheres here – was it beast or human, something with foresight or something obeying simple instructions planted in its even simpler brain millennia before? We will, of course, never arrive at any satisfactory conclusions if only because conclusions are themselves remnants of a time we no longer inhabit, no longer even recognize when it flashes up on a screen and we are asked to comment, in writing, on what we have seen. On whether what we have seen makes any sense in the context of the present. Or when it is combined with what we haven't seen, with what has merely



been implied by the setting we find ourselves in and the fragrances that keep wafting in through the open windows. I am feeling more fatigued by this procedure than are my companions and they can barely keep their eyes open! I think sometimes we are subjected to interrogation simply to satisfy the will of those who would otherwise be without any discernible will at all, who would languish on a pile of pillows until someone discovered them there, all jutting hipbones and skin the consistency of paper. Maybe it's time we began asserting our independence by following certain footpaths through the grass, those that lead the way out of the city -- out of civilization itself -- by way of the junk yard and the water treatment plant. Maybe it's time we started pointing directly at other people's chests with our crooked index fingers just before making that journey out. At least this way we'd be clear of the overhanging power lines that sag and spit their malevolent energy, their unseemly apparitions, at us every moment of every day without most of us knowing where exactly these apparitions are coming from. We just wish they'd go away. Think of the publicity afterward! The headlines screaming our triumph in capital letters, the public servants committing the civic equivalent of ritual suicide -- saying not their own names but someone else's name over and over again, repeating it until that

name begins to sound like a collection of nonsense syllables conjured up in order to cast a spell. The birds, for their part, know better than to hang around and let such sounds affect them adversely. They scatter from the branches of the trees, fly as high as they can until they appear to be mere specks against the overcast sky, remnants of some memory that moved us once to tears but which now seems flimsy and alien. The sort of thing you dispel with a quick shake of the head, followed by a long swallow of whatever liquid is in the glass you just happen at that moment to be holding in your hand.

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Central to the myth is the idea that we share certain affinities with creatures that do not resemble us at first glance. They have no faces, for instance, and no means of locomotion. They have no means of communicating with the outside world at all except through the myth itself, through the perpetuation of the myth by those of us who have a stake in seeing it continue. The reasons for this are myriad and sound, when you listen to them listed one after another by the experts who have gained a great deal of notoriety as a result of this enterprise, like place names elaborated for no other reason than to induce in the listener

some sort of trance so that those who serve in the role of accomplice may go through the contents of their coat pockets. Again, there are innumerable waves of vision that overtake me, some of them so vivid as to seem like celluloid recreations of events from my own recent past, and some as murky as the air above Denver when the clouds are full of whatever sediment from west of that location is light enough to be borne aloft. I enjoy the passage of these images before my eyes and am tempted sometimes to participate in them, but I know, however remotely and abstractly, that this is not possible, that my role must remain solely that of observer, much as it must when I am not having visions but instead just engaging in day-to-day activities. I can't imagine a more supple and rewarding existence, though, than that offered by the passing enchantments and when they cease, I know I will be left in something close to despair because that is the condition that most frequently follows, in my experience at least, its opposite. That neither state can last indefinitely is, of course, axiomatic and, I suppose, something to be grateful for. But still, who wouldn't rather spend his time in the grips of that which makes him ecstatic than that which makes him long for the grave? And who wouldn't alter the contracts or forge the necessary documents to see this

happen, so long as such alteration couldn't be traced back to him too quickly or easily – something that would undoubtedly lead to retribution and recrimination and all the other unpleasant effects invariably unleashed on those who refuse to abide by the guidelines we all seem to have agreed upon at some distant juncture? Of course, none of us can remember exactly where or when or why, though we have our suspicions. These involve flickering torchlight and the sound of people screaming in pain and we prefer to put those suspicions out of our minds whenever they make their appearance. We treat them as if they were once related to us but have since found disfavor for something they said or did. But secretly, inside, we know they are the types of things earlier peoples used to create their epic, oral poetry, to document their doubts and their horror and their outrage for later generations and to simultaneously rob such things of their power to cause harm in what might otherwise seem an interminable present.

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A dozen steps lead to a lower level where the tropical vegetation has overtaken and concealed much of the concrete and the glass tile work, hides it from view and simultaneously allows the local amphibians to thrive

without drying up, desiccation being that state they fear most – given the ready permeability of their membranes – if amphibians can accurately be said to fear anything at all. Which is not to suggest they are a particularly brave class of creature so much as to question the complexity of what goes on inside their heads. I consider lying beneath a particularly impressive overarching of banana leaves all day, or until the sun has drifted so far west as to seem as if it doesn't belong to our world any longer. As if it were its own entity and obeyed its own agenda without being the least bit concerned with what we might need or want from it, those of us occupying a sphere ninety-six million miles away (if you are to insist on a materialist reading of where we stand in relation to the other objects of the universe and what our influence over them might conceivably entail). Shouldn't the architecture of the sky follow some set and rigid pattern rather than simply changing every hour with the whims of whatever architect designed the sky in the first place and then decided he didn't like it, decided it might as well be left to its own devices? Or are we asking too much of the sky when we attempt to discern within it patterns and messages and other oblique ways of giving guidance to those of us here on solid ground where guidance is – to put it mildly -- so difficult to come by? It

usually takes the form of words spoken by relatives determined to make us feel as if we have been behaving in a decidedly selfish fashion, or those written down by authors who don't really care if we pay attention to what they are saying. They are too busy wondering where their next swallow of good scotch is going to come from and how they are going to take the events that actually happened to them at some point in the distant past – be they traumatic and involving the sudden appearance of serpents or blissful and necessitating the tangling of limbs and the quickening of breath one otherwise associates with staying on a treadmill too long – and alter them so as to make them unrecognizable to those who might have participated in the original events. If these altered events manage somehow, for all that, to become potentially transformative, to become that which finally makes the unbearable lives of those who consume them bearable if only for an hour or two (those who have plunked down their fourteen dollars and ninety-five cents), so much the better. But of course it is a balancing act with no hope of success, the sort of thing the high-wire artist experiences just as the wind is picking up and he is preparing to plunge the thirty or so stories to his death. The sort of thing that makes us wonder if perhaps we ought to abandon our search for transcendence, for

anything even remotely life-affirming, and decide finally to just get by -- the way rodents do when they are shredding bits of newspaper to line their nests or the way the invasive zebra mussels of the great lakes do when they attach themselves to solid surfaces beneath the waves and wait out whatever time they have been given without so much as moving an inch.

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How frequently are we deluded when it comes to our hearts' capacity to endure emotional overload and cruelty? Or the value of the surrounding pastureland? I would have expected, given the carnage I wake up to, some premonition, some visual approximation of the violence that must have ensued during my intoxication. Some channeling of its actual horror into a poetic, transformative equivalent. The sort of thing that turns us into characters in a narrative rather than just blobs of grease and protoplasm bouncing from one place to another without any clear understanding of why. But there is nothing of the sort -- just what seem like immeasurable expanses of cognitive prairieland populated by beasts with long shadows. Violin music piped in from somewhere in the clouds as if there were speakers there hung from dirigibles and a microphone

and a single performer standing in the gondola with his bow working furiously and his mind occupied with the rigors of improvisation. Even so, the final product sounds as if it has been scored and re-scored again, laid out from beginning to end with the mathematical precision of an engineer's blueprints for a bridge to span the Orinoco. Perhaps we protect ourselves unconsciously from the horrors that surround us at every moment of every day, and so when something extra-vigorous occurs -- when we are immersed in blood and the untoward facts of the body to an extent heretofore unimagined and unimaginable -- we have some resources to fall back on. Procedures made instinctive because of repetition, because of our ability to get in a rut and stay there. After all, when viewed properly, the rut is a real lifesaver. It can lead the way reliably across an otherwise treacherous stretch of wilderness.

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Endeavor to drop the accent as it will never sound authentic, even if it is. We judge words based on their sound and not their meaning because we know somewhere deep inside ourselves without anyone having to tell us, without anyone having to demonstrate this truth through intricate logical maneuvers, that words can never mean anything, or



at least they can't mean anything in quite the same way that objects can. When you place them side by side on a flat surface. And then you step back and you wave your arm a certain way – in a sweeping motion over the objects. Or, if they are large, in their general direction. Those in the audience will begin to shift about uncomfortably in their seats. Minutes pass, more people get anxious and pretty soon someone is shouting in the back row, stringing together expletives as if they were bits of shell and he is in the process of making a necklace. Make no mistake – he and the others like him are in on it; they have been rehearsed, they have been carefully selected based on the color of their mustaches and the blank looks they get in their eyes whenever you ask them a question concerning the Adriatic Sea, or the hypotenuse of a triangle and why it is almost always more beautiful than the other sides. After the others have cleared out, I approach a table occupied by a single, snarky-looking little man and three women each at least twice his size. I try to make out what they are saying before I get there, but the conversation unravels at the speed of electricity and sounds – as a consequence of each of these people speaking at exactly the same time – as if it were created by a machine. One with a handle on the side and a mechanism hidden away in the interior, a mechanism that

is set in motion by someone turning the handle. The mechanism, I imagine, forces gears of soft metal to rub against one another so that there is a great deal of friction, but not an excess of heat. Hence, the hum. One gets the sense immediately that all of this apes the physical operations of human coitus while intentionally leaving out some of the more salient factors, such as what we like to call an “emotional connection” and an imagination wholly taken up sometimes with images of other people’s shoes. It doesn’t take long, though, to realize we have been misled, have been left to fend for ourselves on a terrace overlooking a series of other terraces, each of which is, as near as we can tell (and believe me – we look; we have no choice but to look) abandoned. Bare of all life, except for perhaps a housefly here and there. Even that we can’t be sure of because the distances involved are such that what one thinks one sees might turn out, in actual fact, to be an illusion -- a trick of depth and shadows, and the mind’s unconquerable desire to populate the world beyond its borders with other entities very much like itself – meaning, very frail things, abysmal things, just moments from flickering out.

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The pathway diverges suddenly in several different directions, and then several more after that, and so on, until when you split up in an attempt to follow each of them in turn you find that there are never enough members of your party to complete the job. Attrition is the official term for this phenomenon but it is lacking in color and makes one think of the pencils they used to hand out in school. The dull yellow paint on the outside, no doubt heavy with lead, and the irresistible taste of them on your tongue. The slight give beneath your teeth. Wouldn't it be wonderful to find yourself in the old haunts again, shimmying up poles cold to the touch and with feathers tied to the tops of them like decoys? When I come to again, there is blood everywhere. The floor is slick with it and I slip in my instinctual attempts to get away, to place some distance between me and the offending liquid. There is a sound like screaming, only too shrill to qualify, more like an extended animal squawk -- so long as that animal is diminutive in stature and prone to flights of terror. I look around for a moment trying to figure out which direction it is coming from, confused by the fact that it seems to be coming from all directions at once, and it takes me another moment or two to realize what this means. The center of all phenomena is the place from which all phenomena seem to radiate and to which they all

eventually return. If you were standing at precisely this point, I suspect you would experience a void. One composed of the incoming and the outgoing cancelling one another out. You would think perhaps you had stumbled into some other dimension and did not possess the perceptual or cognitive tools necessary to make any sense of it. In this, of course, as in most things, you would be mistaken. The sound, I realize, escapes from my own throat and at the moment of realization it stops, as if it has merely been trying to call attention to itself. Once this has been accomplished, there is no more need of its presence. It is free to continue its activities elsewhere. I see Anda standing in the corner of the room, partially lit now by a torch on the wall. She is standing over what looks at first glance like a rumpled sack of some sort of grain or produce, the shape of it suggesting it has been dumped here unceremoniously and its contents have begun to spill out on the floor where they will certainly go to waste unless someone comes along shortly with a hose and a bucket and twenty minutes or more of spare time to see to a systematic clean up. A sanitation and cataloging. A transporting from one place to another -- and then probably another after that -- all of it accompanied, one would imagine, by a continual distracted muttering under the breath.

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At some point, our wounds – both literal and figurative, though I suppose it is the latter we fear more -- begin to stitch themselves up when no one is looking. They threaten to usher in an era of relative sanity and hygiene unlike anything we have experienced before. They are sick and tired of waiting for us to look after them properly. To figure out where each part belongs in relation to the whole and why we need different designations for the part and the whole when they are very nearly identical entities if examined closely. They belong to each other the way we belong to the ashes from which we are said to have arisen and to which we are said to return by those who don't believe in anything other than a very strict interpretation of the phrases they read when they are home by themselves in bed with the lamp on and the wind howling outside like miners lost inside the mine, and a very strict interpretation of the phrases that have been recited out loud to them at important ceremonies throughout their lives. At the start of banquets, for instance, that might then last sometimes in excess of six hours. The actual length all depends on who has been seated next to whom and what they find they have in common to discuss. Much of what gets said at functions of this sort involves the body and how to manipulate it in

such a way that it can be expected to give pleasure to others. I don't think the object is to inform, though, to make sure those in attendance walk away with knowledge or insights they did not possess previously. I think the purpose is to eliminate all discussion of purpose once and for all. To relegate the concept to something like an empty box stored away in the corner of the cellar. The same corner where most of the other boxes are stored as well, and should you decide to open one of them because you are curious, because you have found that any enclosed cardboard space is apt to hide something of value, you would discover that it too has been used to store items and ideas no longer deemed necessary or relevant. Old baseball cards. Whisk brooms and ledgers in green covers with hand-printed numbers running down their pages like rain water down the tin sides of a shanty. Or the tattoos on the arms of the woman you loved once who you can't quite get out of your mind now even though it has been twenty years since you last spoke to her, since she last wrapped you in those arms immaculate and tendriled, with the eagles anchored to them and staring out at a world fortunate enough to know how to move, to have never forgotten what it's like to be in one place and then decide you want to be in another. And finding in the process that there is nothing capable of

stopping you. No stubborn flesh. No borders made permanent through the spilling of ink and blood.

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Finally my hands are free and I can stand. This in itself is a revelation, the sort of thing that corresponds to doors opening and doves (or at least starlings) flying around outside the windows. When I approach Anda, I don't know what I am expecting but afterwards I realize it probably looks and sounds a lot like a drum when you hit it with a mallet while placing the palm of your other hand directly over the drumhead itself and drawing it taut, producing a muffled effect. Everyone in the room still recognizes that an instrument of some sort is being played. They re-direct their gazes for a moment, but then focus again on whatever held their attention previously. Part of the problem is our tendency to willfully scar our own pasts after the fact, as if we can't stand the idea of our pasts existing without us, continuing on forever in exactly the same condition we left them in, which isn't always as pristine as perhaps we might believe. The results are the spiritual and mental equivalent of lesions. I subscribe to the belief -- held now only by those who inhabit the forests at the very edge of civilization and beyond, those who look at us when we approach as if we

had materialized directly out of their ancient myths and they must dispatch us, they must send us back to those myths *post haste* before we wind up changing their everyday lives forever -- that our aimless existence is every bit as important and sustaining as is our purposeful one. That when the two of them come into contact, when they do battle, as it were, on the open plain, we ought to just turn our backs and walk away. We ought to find the nearest cafe and sit down with a book and a cup of coffee and pretend none of it concerns us in the least. Not the outcome. Not the birds hopping about spastically through the branches of the trees or along the sidewalk where people have inevitably dropped crusts of bread and nickels. Not the people in the chairs close by actively questioning our use of basic level categories like "bird" and "tree" and "chair" when we could just as easily delve deeper into the subordinate categories of the specialist and the expert. We could make what we have to say so much more challenging then, so that those listening to us might walk away with the sense that they have been interacting with a human being, in the fullest sense of that word, and not simply that which registers what is available to it at the most fundamental of levels, like a camera or a piece of paper on which a child has yet to sketch her initial outlines, her half-faces and primitive



approximations of the things that occupy the room with her -- whether visible or otherwise -- with a marker or a paintbrush provided specifically for the task, or, for that matter, a cast-off nub of pencil.

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The bodily movements in question resemble those of the flâneur inasmuch as they do not seem to have any ultimate goal, any purpose identifiable to those who are on the sidelines and know their insights rival those of the scholars who place their findings in journals with names we find it difficult to pronounce. Names originating almost always in the Greek and therefore striking our ears with all the subtlety of a claw hammer. I recoil from violence when it arrives as itself, as something so obviously designed to cause bodily harm to others that one can't reasonably argue otherwise. But when there is some room for interpretation, for deciding that what one experiences -- what one sees and what one hears -- is not necessarily the same thing as what is actually out there, my mind increases the speed of its operations two or threefold and the ideas that result begin to accumulate at the base of some enormous structure that has also appeared as if out of thin air. It towers above everything else around it and you might crane your neck in

an effort to catch a glimpse of the top where it recedes beyond what look suspiciously like clouds, but it is impossible to see the top given that the structure has no top and no bottom. It is all middle much like a story someone is already telling when you walk into the room and which continues long after you have lost interest in it and decide to leave. I become acutely aware for some reason that my hat is the same color as the structure and I begin to wonder, as is only natural, if maybe they are made of the same material. But my curiosity has never been overly assertive. It is just the sort of thing, like an aged canine, that raises its head at the advent of a loud noise but lowers it again almost immediately, the realization that a noise by itself is rarely harmful overtaking it and allowing room then for more mundane considerations to make their appearance. Like whatever happened to those vivid dreams that used to haunt my sleep at night? Why aren't there human beings fumbling about in the dining room any longer? In the other room people have decided to do without their shoes. They have piled them up in the corners. Some of them have chucked their shoes out the windows, afraid, I suppose, that the others in the room will be able to discern the most compromising details about their lives just by gazing at what they put on their feet. I would follow suit,

but I know I'd just have to explain myself later; I'd have to come up with a more compelling reason for my decision because no one believes me when I am telling the truth. The truth tends to tumble from my mouth in discreet pieces. Broken. Shattered at the edges. If you were to run your fingers over it at these edges (and not the middle which is dull and cold to the touch) you could expect to draw blood, to accidentally dislodge splinters and push them so deep into your flesh, they would never come out again.

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Power originates in depth, or winds up there. One or the other, I forget. The principle is one that causes great misery wherever it crops up, yet still we hanker after it like crepes. Should we overcome this desire, another one very similar to it in appearance shows up immediately and we don't so much start over again as pretend to have everything under control. Deep down inside, where the memes are hard at work like termites, where the brotherhood of rarely-intuited motives is forging bonds of the sort we normally associate with members of the high school track and field team, we know the best, the most rewarding parts of our existence have disintegrated more or less permanently. There will be no re-casting, no more solidifying around

moisture. There will be nothing in the way of counter-clockwise motion. It is Beulah lying headless on the floor, the result Anda tells me, of my own intoxication, of the paste spread so liberally across my lips. We have been planning this for months, she says as she leads me back up the stairs. We just had to have someone of sufficient size and emotional instability to get the job done. Nothing personal. From the shadowy back passages below, the tormented screams of Beulah's idiot progeny rise up as the other former captives are having a go with implements I try hard not to imagine. Once you set yourself a goal involving the elimination of images, you are bound to fail. The mind has an agenda that is hard to fathom, but rest assured the primary item is one involving liberty even in the face of the inconsequential. Stubborn assertion of its own will before the will of he who claims to possess it. The same applies to the surface of the earth where you will find, should you go looking for them, organisms of every size and shape and configuration arrayed against the soil itself in a battle which has been raging since the very earliest days of the planet, but which we have only just recently begun to recognize as something more complex and meaningful than just scenes for our common edification. Perhaps what occurs does so simply because the alternative is unthinkable. Space turned

vacuum inside another vacuum. Nihilism without some bizarre bearded Russian around to comment on it and turn it into something of interest when we all know such terms hold no inherent interest in themselves. They don't even enlighten the situations they were coined to describe.

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What is it about Vronsky that makes it so difficult to remain conscious? How am I to take the foreshadowing, the tic in my left eye that seems to grow in intensity until it is no longer a tic but a full-fledged shudder, an indication of pathology at such a deep level there is no hope, really, of ever being able to un-earth and eliminate it once and for all? The only option available at this point is complete surrender and then a lifetime of rehashing the events that led me to this place – a gate nine feet high, someone pacing back and forth behind the gate in the shadows cast by poplars and other indigenous species of tree. Who is that over there and why does he keep lighting pieces of paper on fire and then waving them about above his head? Could it be that what we call communication is really just a way to isolate ourselves even further through gestures designed to seem meaningful at first glance, while still managing to withhold any information that might otherwise let us know

what is at stake and who is liable to be harmed in the process? Of course I don't mean physically, but I don't mean emotionally either. Think of the concept of the hybrid, the thing that is both itself and something else at the same time. Or at different times, alternating times. Like an amphibian which is both reptile and fish. Or at least has the potential to turn eventually into the one and revert back finally to the other. I like that the hum produced when this occurs is very like a soothing human voice. If you listen closely enough you will begin to hear barely discernible words. Whether these words actually exist or are inserted by the mind afterward because the mind can't help but to operate through some dim approximation of language, is anyone's guess, and there are as many schools of thought on the issue as there are individuals who are willing to create a school of thought. So that they might be taken seriously, perhaps for the first time in their lives. So that they might have something to point to when they too are standing before an imposing gate and whoever is standing behind it, in the shadows, asks them why they are there and what they hope to achieve once they are granted access to the environs behind the gate. The limitless plains, the villages laid out as symmetrically as handsome human faces. The residents of these villages as happy and

contented as if they had been allowed to reside forever in the most spectacularly fevered of all their tens of thousands of spectacularly fevered dreams.

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Outside, the moon is low and animals are making a racket in the hedges. The sound of it, the sound of anything really, is soothing now and reminds me of a time when sound itself was enchanting, something to cause wonder and awe. It was the ingredient most likely to be missing and when it showed up eventually, everyone in the area spoke of its appearance in whispers. They agreed with one another for the first time in weeks, setting aside differences that had haunted them for generations. Usually these originated in what to outsiders might have seemed inconsequential quarrels and barely noticeable differences in physiology. Eyes set a millimeter too far apart. Lips with indentions in them. I suggest we take the river again, but of course the johnboat is long since washed away or destroyed and, as Anda says, civilized human beings can not rely upon the whims of the river. It will turn them into beasts by and by, assuming it hasn't already done so. I like the way she talks, the firm resolve she exhibits even in the face of hopeless situations or those situations with qualities one can't

exactly quantify or describe – situations that don't really seem like situations at all because they come and go with almost no one else noticing. They adopt the timbre of old photographs, meaning they stand still for extended periods of time, and when they do decide to move – or to incorporate movement within themselves by sending their fundamental elements scurrying about from one place to another like arachnids – they almost always make it seem as if they haven't decided anything at all but have merely been acted upon by exterior forces. What these forces could possibly consist of no one is sure because whenever someone tries to write up the paper that would identify them, he is poisoned mysteriously in his sleep or he loses his reason, sometimes precipitously, sometimes overnight. Anda beckons me to follow her into the woods and at first it seems as if she is making things up as she goes along, stumbling blindly through the thistle and the mulberry that is surprisingly thick. Maybe the concept of quantity is one that is just destined to remain forever alien to me, something the pursuit of which I should abandon so as not to make myself look any more ridiculous than I already do, especially to those who watch my progress on occasion from the tops of nearby cliffs. Who signal to me, try to communicate some message to me I have as yet to



decipher, by flashing sunlight in my direction, by reflecting it off the lenses in their spectacles or pieces of broken bottle or whatever else they might have discovered along the way that is possessed of a highly polished surface.

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*Yes, it's worrisome when Eulalie professes a new fascination for the love suicide plays of Chikamatsu. Not because I think they'll give her any ideas but because I can't imagine Eulalie's interest piqued by anything so tangible as ordinary words strung out crosswise on a piece of paper. Nothing you can hold in your hands, nothing you can peel the outsides off of the way you are compelled almost to take the clothes off a doll. But we shouldn't put too great a burden on this observation as it is frail at the center like all observations, and therefore wont to buckle. And it is apt to make a noise when it does so that we will spend the next six months attempting to decipher, ignoring in the process those who would be willing to love us, even groom us in the old-fashioned way, despite our ungainly appearance. Our outsized ears. Our shuffling gait. Maybe Eulalie is trying to tell us something the only way she knows how – through extra sensory perception. And the language of the body which is a language everyone speaks in common even when*

*we find we are no longer possessed of an actual body. We have relinquished it due to an unforeseen illness or an accident involving the railroad and our poor peripheral vision. This is the point at which, if we were adept at moving our puppets, we would have them move to the center of the arena and gaze intently into each other's enormous eyes. We would wait breathlessly for the trumpets to play in unison off-stage, the agreed upon signal to proceed with the final act: the raising of the blades, the shaking of those empty heads, a shaking designed to signify either grief or the overwhelming anxiety one would, of course, expect when facing the termination of one type of existence and the consequent beginning of another. Not that I put too much credence in those doctrines that say we are going to recognize immediately and cleave to those who mean the most to us when we meet them on the other side. When you get right down to it, there probably aren't any sides. No angles, no walls. And even if there are, you can all but guarantee that these things exist precisely to separate us from one another, to ensure, for instance, that Eulalie will remain forever out of reach. Like a pomegranate in a locked cupboard. The kind of cupboard, say, with glass in the doors so that you can see what it is you are missing. You know you have merely to break the glass, to reach in and take the*

*pomegranate, to make off with that which has tempted you so sorely. But you won't. You are afraid of cutting your fingers. You are afraid of accidentally ingesting the microscopic shards of glass that will, no doubt, have lodged themselves in the meantime in the fruit's otherwise flawless scarlet skin.*

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Each letter stands so close to the next, we see a blending where there is none, a conglomeration that turns sentences into mere smudges of black and renders the message incoherent. When you add speed to the equation, a passing at velocity in whatever bus or boat or taxicab carries us, you can forget about deciphering invitations, determining context or adjusting your long-held expectations. Anda promises civilization within an hour's march, but the humidity is high and I'm still feeling dizzy from the intoxication, so I have to sit down in what appears to be the remains of an ancient chicken coop, almost entirely taken over now by weeds. In the shade of the trees that tower above the structure, Anda caresses my shell and speaks to me of the far end of the universe where, she imagines, planets spin in endless, meaningless rotation and the stars extinguish themselves from sheer boredom. Her hands feel

like the antidote to all poison and my mind is suddenly filled with images that have nothing to do with the world or anyone in it. They revolve upon themselves so that their underbellies become obscenely prominent and then there is a sound in the center of them like trumpets. It's almost impossible to reach the stage one stage beyond where you currently find yourself, but struggle is expected and when the wind bangs at the window like a fist, you can be excused for taking this as a sign. Maybe we are built to love only ourselves and when we escape these original settings, when we find room inside for more than one, we are not so much transcending that original condition as re-stating it, turning it into its opposite by saying it out loud. You know, says Anda, her fingertips mapping seams absently, you are not really an egg. You have just convinced yourself of this at some point in the past for reasons that you probably don't even remember, reasons that have ossified by now and sit somewhere far away, on the ground, like stones. If you were to stumble upon them again all these years later and pick them up and crack them open, you'd find inside an empty, black core. A core of nothing. By way of illustration, Anda pulls at the organ that has begun, thanks to her exertions, to crack its way through brittle shell for the first time in my memory -- something tangled and intricate and

long, engorged now and throbbing, insistent against her skin. I fear for a moment she has let some sort of contaminant in, that the compromise is one-sided and I will suffer terribly and die a protracted death, but she seems to know what she's doing, and besides! when one discovers something new, something animated and bizarre and pointy, one has to stick around long enough to give it a name. To determine what it is capable of unleashing upon the unsuspecting public.

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The pit at the center of the cherry stands no chance against my teeth, not on this day when the sounds that drift down from the floor above are those of fallen bottles and someone playing a familiar melody on what I take to be a mandolin. I'm left with innumerable hard bits on my tongue, intermixed with the half-chewed pulp, and an unpleasant sense that the melody is going to haunt me until late in the evening when I can finally put a name to it. When I can tell myself that what I am doing is no different than what everyone else on the planet is doing at some point or another. Barking commands at imaginary underlings. Exploring roads that seem to have no set direction -- no single identity of their own -- just so as to have something

to do for half an hour. Or until the clock stops working because it is one of those with hands and the force of gravity has finally grown stronger than whatever force it was that allowed those hands to defy gravity for years on end. Of course, just when I think I have turned a corner, when I think I will be able to continue without suffering one abominable pang after another for the rest of my life, I look into her eyes again for just a moment and I am lost. How can the most intense experience one knows in a lifetime be the simple act of gazing? Thank God at times like this for the invention of the trombone! For those who know how to make the trombone sound faintly like a full-fledged thought first emerging from that region of the mind where thoughts have not yet been granted their full compliment and arsenal. Where they are mere lines and shadows floating about at the surface of something very like a soup or stew. And you are expected to dip some sort of implement (this, in the right hand, I suppose, is the trombone itself, though it could also conceivably be other items like a spatula or a novel, so long as you are the one who writes it) into the soup or stew so as to dredge up from the bottom whichever pieces have gotten stuck, have been burnt on and so can be expected to contain the greatest concentration of minerals and collagens and whatever peculiar shapes give our

thoughts their solidity, their ability to hang together even when we hurl them at objects in the outside world that we might otherwise expect to dash them to pieces. Soon it becomes obvious that it will never be enough for us to exist inside our own skin. We are expected to occupy other selves as thoroughly as we occupy our own. And yes, we are supposed to ask permission first, but that doesn't ensure a painless transition. Quite the contrary! There is blood in there and we will, by definition and the laws of physics, displace it. We will take up space previously reserved for nerve fibers and whatever serves as the interior equivalent of a mirror.

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Affix support braces to the walls and still there is a rumbling sound, a vibration that seems to emanate directly from them, from inside rather than where you would expect it to, namely the ridges and fault lines that run for some distance along the horizon. We can't always see the horizon but we know it is there because people refer to it constantly. It seems to be one of those things in the world without which we could not orient ourselves. We could not stand up straight for any length of time. In this we are very similar to the bean plants and other vegetation the elderly never tire

of planting around their otherwise run down houses. Not that we need the comparison to make sense, to be coherent the way ordinary speech is coherent until you introduce narcotics or lesions on the brain. But still, we have certain verbal expectations and when these are violated, we feel as if we have steered, quite by accident, into a world nearly identical to our own, but with certain key differences as well. Long straight patches where nothing happens. The conspicuous absence of birds. Anda straddles me, takes the crooked emanation into herself as easily as if she had been created specifically for this moment. The sensation is not at all what I had come to expect given the descriptions of it one finds in periodicals or the loose talk of acquaintances when they don't realize their every word is being memorized by someone with a vested interest in what is being said. It is a category of bliss, to be sure, one at the very top of that ladder, but the operations of the mind do not cease and the operations of the body follow a logic all too familiar to anyone who has studied the positivists. Anda makes noises I try for a while to emulate, but there seems to be no reason for this and she shoots me a quizzical look out of the corner of her eye at one point which makes me feel self-conscious. So I begin instead to speak out loud the filthiest things that come to mind. That they come to mind



at this moment with almost no prodding strikes me as something just shy of a miracle, the sort of thing that occurs, apparently, at regular intervals the further back you go in time. But which has now all but dried up (if one can, in fact, rely on a comparison using the organic concept of moisture or the lack thereof to capture the entirely inorganic concept of the miraculous). With the possible exception, now and then, of burn patterns on ordinary pieces of bread. Or someone snapping a bungee cord above a river and living to tell the tale. Even if she breaks a collarbone in the process. Even if she emerges covered in contusions. But make no mistake. There is no apparent structure to these contusions at all. They seem entirely random in their distribution, as if to call into question the concept of the guiding hand at precisely the same time the outcome of the event itself seems to verify it, seems indeed to insist on it in quite the haunting vox alto.

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Panic sets in right before resignation and the two begin an intricate dance that puts anything else you have seen (on the island of Bali, for instance) to shame. Later, the same groups of people who first set eyes on one another at the airport are asked a series of questions, the object of which

is to suggest they have been trusting their eyes far too much and ought, at some point soon, to switch allegiance to one of the other senses. Of course no one is going to admit this up front, and, when confronted, the authors of the experiment refuse to act as if they can even write. They stumble about with their hands swinging aimlessly at their sides like broken scaffolding, and as the setting sun gets in their eyes they begin a wailing and a caterwauling more appropriately associated with common apes. There is no point in judging, though, unless judgment will make us feel better about ourselves. This occurs frequently enough, I suppose, to encourage some people to comment on it and others to act as if they have been aware of it since they were very small children. They were in the habit of observing everything that went on around them. The lighting of the oil lamps come sunset. The whispers growing to a crescendo over time. You can determine for yourself whether or not these whispers had anything to do with talcum powder, but, for my part, my mind is made up. It's made up before I ever even step into a room and see all those who might be arrayed against me. Each sitting bare-chested at a desk with an open bottle of ink on it and a handful of old-fashioned goose quills yet to be sharpened. Imagine my horror when I realize what is going to take

place. How I have been tricked into showing up through promises of wealth. Ingots stacked up in crates. Pieces of paper with my name on them and the insignia of what I can only imagine were, at one time, venerable financial institutions or government agencies long since passed now into the mists of non-existence. Someone at my elbow (there always seems to be someone at my elbow these days, as if I have grown so notorious complete strangers can make a living now just by promising to keep a close eye on me around the clock, from morning until night when really they ought to be in their beds sleeping and dreaming about what it's like to make love to someone you have only ever seen at a distance) says something I can't quite make out, but I know it is intended to warn me of the approach of danger on my other side, on the side where my other elbow is located and, at least for the moment, unencumbered by someone's being "at" it. I just have time to duck my head when something weighty, and no doubt very sharp, passes over it, something that makes a terrific hissing sound as it does so, its bulk and momentum sufficient, I suppose, to separate the oxygen molecules in the air from their companions and therefore threaten to make everything around me blow up. At least that's how I imagine things happening at precisely the same time as they are

happening. Perhaps then I have merely to imagine my way out of this predicament as effortlessly as I have imagined my way into it. I have merely to furrow my brow and suddenly, just like that, everything will be back to the way it was last Tuesday.

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Under the earth something stirs, follows its own inclinations to the surface where, I suppose, it finds enormous disappointment and so returns to where it came from. In the meantime, we look around, trying to find what has changed, what this visitation has done to alter our environment. Whatever we see we file away as just so much clutter. We pretend the desk is the desk where we paid our bills the day before. We strain to maintain some sort of consistency in the way we sign our names. Maybe, though, those lines in the soil were made by a tractor. And whoever was driving it had something particular in mind, some message he wished to send to the rest of us but he didn't feel ordinary language was up to the task. He thought he'd sensed in it a separation from the everyday such as you find in the minds of schizophrenics and those who must care for them. Those who are infected with their wards' particular way of discerning the universe and, once infected, abandon

all desire for a cure. Afterward, Anda brushes the leaves from her body and gets dressed and I am left to figure out how to fold back up and conceal this new appendage, this sudden emblem of what I was not previously that still hangs obscenely from the broken portions of my shell, that has pushed its way through and shows no inclination, now that it has been utilized for its obvious purpose, of retreating. We discover important truths on the fly, divine them, as it were, through the simple prosaic refutation of the divine that manual labor represents. A working things over with the hands. A turning the mind into little more than an extension of that which houses it. That which is charged with getting us safely from one place to another, all the while engaging in whatever mischief it can get away with. Breaking off bits of wild sugarcane. Bringing them to the tongue. Anda can't contain her mirth as she watches me fold it and bend it and attempt to conceal, and I would like to be angry, but the endorphins are still running amok -- flooding the plain -- and the sun is sinking somewhere behind us. Animals are moving about now in the underbrush not far from what is left of the coop and it is time for us to move on. Once under way, Anda utters the name of the city that awaits us at the end of the path, utters it with some intensity as if to make of it a talisman. I ask her

to repeat the name several times, pretending not to be familiar with it, but I just like the sound of her voice, the sound of something tangible residing on her voice like a wooden box of the sort that usually contains something of value. A bracelet or a small ceramic pipe. An ardent, handwritten note from someone no one else in the family knows.

*Up Jumped the Apparatus* (Previously Unpublished)

Each morning the geese pass by overhead, reminding us with their otherworldly grumbling and their webbed feet colored like the bile and other liquids that escape the body after terrible collisions that we had better remember our pasts down to the finest detail or we are likely to succumb to the widely held (at least recently) belief that we are not entirely human. That we have been plucked up somehow as if by magic from the sludge on the ocean floor and placed out naked in the hot sun for reasons that don't quite add up. Reasons that seem flatly sadistic when examined over toast and mimosas in the morning, or later when the wind intensifies and the windows rattle in their frames like someone hard pressed to gather her breath due to love or illness or the passage of seven, even eight decades spent breathing the normal way.

I manage to rip portions of a single piece of paper free from the underside of the desk drawer where it had become stuck. I spread the resultant fragments out in front of me as if trying to decide which one I prefer. Which one strikes me as the best hope for beginning the process over again or maybe forcing it to come to a close. When I can't make up

my mind, I sketch a pictogram or two in at the edges, a skill I picked up while on scholarship abroad, but the part that is supposed to look like the roof of a house is almost always skewed to the left for some reason and this alters the meaning so significantly you'd think I had simply decided to invent my own way of communicating because all of the previous ways had failed miserably. In fact, they are all stacked up and intermingled in the corner, deposited there one after the other by their own out of control momentum, and when you try to separate them, to allow them each to attain once again a modicum of its own autonomy, the crows – who have to that point been observing mostly dispassionately from where they have gathered outside in the branches of a tree, object and even begin to throw themselves violently at the French doors, so that some of them are inevitably killed and some are maimed and some simply turn around and fly away and are never seen in this neighborhood again.

If only we could mimic that passion, capture even a fraction of it in our everyday lives – which are shadowy and drawn out, made to feel as if they have no choice in the matter of who they belong to or why they are attached so firmly – we might spend our time more profitably tapping out villanelles or art criticism on a typewriter, we might emerge



finally from the spiritual caverns that have held us stationary for generations simply because they seemed like the best options. The air down there was cool and dry and you didn't have to worry about the weather or the sound of electronic musical instruments, a sound that frequently grates painfully on the ear, makes the diminutive bones inside the ear twist on themselves and feel as if they have been split down the middle.

Accurate measurement requires one's knuckles rather than a calendar or a long piece of rope tied at regular intervals in knots that are difficult to undo when the day is ending and the sun beginning to set behind the water tower and the chicken coops that seem to run for miles on either end of town. They emit an eerie communal wail when the wind turns cold and finds its way inevitably through the cracks and the crevices in the walls. I don't know that particular language or even if it can be considered a language given that its grammatical rules have yet to be set down in any systematic way, though intuition suggests a brilliant child is even now working at night under the covers with a flashlight and a handful of raisins to keep his energy levels up, and his concentration. Or, I suppose, to ward off whatever malevolent spirits might have decided in the interim to occupy the room as well. To turn it into a place

of communion with both the living and the dead, a prospect that has some others in the neighborhood crying foul because they don't understand the difference between the two. They can't master that demarcation that seems so patently obvious to the rest of us we lose very little sleep in its contemplation. We might even be said to have reached a place where the morbid idea itself has been swallowed up, never again to return, like sailors on the primeval seas who stumbled accidentally upon a particularly vicious whirlpool, who muttered numerous useless prayers and who were remembered back home, when they were remembered at all, as having been a little rash in their decision-making.

A solitary box the size of a calculator sits beneath the window. It is wrapped in silver paper which glints in the candlelight and reminds me of a time when the whole world seemed concealed in this fashion, and you had merely to massage some portion of it with your hands – even just your eyes – to reveal what was hidden underneath, a process that might last days or weeks or entire lifetimes, depending on your level of motivation, and almost always ended with the bitter realization that you had come back somehow to where you first began. I can't imagine who might have left it here or if maybe it was intended for someone I visited in

the recent past and I simply forgot to take it with me. But I haven't really visited anyone in more than a month, and besides, who has time to give people objects that they probably already possess? Who has time to leave the house, hop on the train and ride it a certain distance and then disembark, while it is still technically in motion, and then continue down the public stairs there in great, joyful leaps until you reach the bottom and realize you don't know which direction to turn?

After the event (or the simulacra of the event), a bitter let down sits silently in the middle of the chest like an onion, and no matter how desperately you claw at it when no one is around, you can't get at its center. Can't open it to the healing properties of light. And when it morphs it does so silently, slowly, until it has taken over all but the soles of the feet and begins to cast shadows. Small birds live under the eaves of the house and follow those shadows to the place at the end of the street where someone once shot himself because he couldn't think of anything better to do. He had accomplished every goal he had set for himself when he was a child and he thought there wouldn't be enough time. Better to keep the list relatively short, to gaze occasionally at the moon before it disappears altogether. I hear the same suggestion when I go to the store for cream, which is

not very good for me. It turns the lining of my stomach into something like a tree, and I talk to myself so as to withstand the pain. When that doesn't work, I practice the coronet because I've grown rusty. But I know it's just a matter of letting time pass and then everything will be as it used to be. The problem is the required amount of time keeps getting longer and I am afraid one day it will stretch out to infinity just because it can. Just because infinity is a real number, or at least something more substantial than a concept, which is how I first internalized it.

The rain plays at the window, and I can see slow streaks from where I am sitting, the light, what little is left of it, bent round against itself and the objects on the other side tortured out of their familiar appearances. Then again, perhaps it is the sunlight which does the torturing, and it is only on days like today when we are given the true look of things, when we are admitted into the bosom of reality because we have been patient, we have not let our minds be corrupted by the inertia of the everyday.

You can still see stains on the concrete where the suicide's blood ebbed away, though I have my suspicions sometimes that the deed as it has been told to us was never actually performed here, or anywhere else for that matter. That it

arose from our overpowering instinct for myth the way toadstools arise whenever there's sufficient quantities of moist soil and fallen tree trunks, that it worked its way patiently into the atmosphere where it could be snatched up at random and consumed. And then suddenly the cosmos makes perfect sense for ten or twelve hours, it circles around above our heads, perfectly behaved and sensible down to the last millimeter. Of course, the effect is temporary and soon we are left again to fend for ourselves. Headaches ensue and the rings of Saturn seem so far away and alien suddenly, they might as well be made up. They might as well have never existed at all except in the pages of comic books or epic poems where the only real damage they can inflict is limited to the illustrated spacecraft that stumble unwittingly into their midst or the souls of the terrestrial dead plucked down there (instead of, say, purgatory) for the sake of the grim story someone decided need to be told and where they complain, just like the rest of us, about the bitter cold and the monotonous view and the almost total lack of human contact.

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An uneasy truce settles over the fields and the riverbank, and you can almost hear the creatures that live there

plotting. Against one another, against the fate that awaits them all but which they have only the slightest inkling of -- an instinct, a burr at the back of the throat. One they spend hours and days trying to erase the way we erase the past as a matter of habit -- because it otherwise sits too closely and does not allow us to breathe properly or move as freely as possible. It is like leg irons in that regard, or a wet winter coat. The trouble with symbols is that they accumulate and insist on their own significance, they draw the eye. Similarly the past plays its passive aggressive melodies at the back of the mind and just when you think you have pinpointed one of them, have determined which period of time it properly belongs to, another of more recent vintage, or perhaps so ancient as to have predated even the first breath of air you took into your lungs, rears up beside it and alters its complexion, its signature and nuance and you must start all over again. That is, if you don't, in the meantime, decide once and for all to abandon the whole business, to continue as if each waking moment was the only thing that actually exists. The tolling of the bells in the square downtown announcing the hour of the day or perhaps the coming of inclement weather. The radio informing you of the movement of armies overseas, the price of wheat and the name of the soprano who brings the aria to life.

I wait patiently for those voices to transcend themselves, to lift the entire room outside of itself and above, to station me and everything in it in a replica of sorts, with all the same dimensions, all the same objects on all the same shelves, with only an infusion of slightly brighter light to indicate that something has changed, something is not as it was just moments before. When those voices sounded as if they each emerged from a single throat and had a single piece of information to convey before another came along immediately and replaced it. I wait sometimes all day, drawing in the meantime portraits of people I never really knew (mostly those I might have seen recently on the sidewalk, though occasionally historical personages like Balzac or Abraham Lincoln) in the margins of the page and the ink gets on the ends of my fingers and upsets me enormously. I spend twenty minutes or more trying to wash it away. Why I should be disturbed by such a thing, why the ink smudges plunge me into a state very like despair, without the attendant weeping and the staring off into space as if expecting to see in any direction an abyss of ever-widening dimensions, I can't rightly say, though I have my suspicions. They are bookish and a bit embarrassing and I never mention them in company, but when I am alone and the coyotes are howling outside and the black snakes are

rustling about in the hedges, I like to bring them out and go over them in fine detail. I like to examine them as if under a very powerful microscope, if for no other reason than this allows me to alter their dimensions, to turn the finest point of logic or paranoid superstition (they are structured finally one and the same) into a kind of razor blade with which to torment the flesh, to open it slowly and let what is inside come out where it can be evaluated in the light of day. Where it can be praised, if praise is called for, or held up to withering contempt.

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Triangles press themselves into the terrain so seamlessly it is almost impossible to spot them without the use of specially engineered equipment of the kind Eulalie has made a fortune trading in. This is shadowy territory and she refuses to speak of it unless I prime her first with alcohol and whispered nonsense phrases that nevertheless remind her of past declarations of undying love. The cadences, the pained and contorted facial expressions. I stumble on the barely submerged roots of the larger trees in the vicinity and curse them under my breath, but the intent is not serious and I know the storms on the horizon will never reach this place. They will circulate among themselves and



disperse before making it over the ridgeline and then we will be forced to draw water from the river that Balboa himself is said to have bathed in but refused to cross for reasons that have been permanently obscured by history. Or what passes for history here, which is an amalgam of legends and grocery lists, a litany of fierce animal names.

Eulalie's skin seems thin, papery almost and I am worried but do not express myself directly. To do so, I know, is to invite ridicule and tantrums, followed by an extended period of what seem at first glance to be seizures, but turn out on closer inspection to be willed, invented by that part of the mind that accepts its dependence on the flesh only grudgingly, with the innate haughtiness of the reptile. As if to make ironic comment on this, she returns later sporting a shoulder bag of some sort made mostly of what appear to be uncured animal skins and she swats at the flies that congregate as a consequence as if they were merely inconvenient ideas introduced by acquaintances who have drunk too much champagne, who materialize in numbers hard to reconcile with the harsh and inhospitable setting.

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Maybe our geometries help explain their own origins but there are so many of them I find it hard to believe that they

wouldn't just cancel each other out like shadows and light at the margin between the two, that border place where nothing either conceptual or actual can exist. Perhaps as a consequence parallel lines begin to appear on every surface, simply blot out whatever else might have been there through their proliferation, their overwhelming numbers, and if I hadn't been raised with a certain stubborn fortitude, hadn't already been asked to face terrible difficulties before – starvation and the loss of reading materials, periodic swarming of locust-like creatures that weren't in fact locusts but still quite voracious for all that and vocal at night when their child-like hollering would keep you up – I might succumb to madness, if by madness you mean habitual disorientation and snarling and the occasional lack for words appropriate to the situation.

As it is, I stand around a lot by the fountain which makes a noise I find soothing because it transports me back to that moment, years before, when Eulalie undressed before the alpine stream and her eyes turned a different color. Perhaps this was a natural consequence of the sudden change in temperature, but I doubt it. I think it is something she can make happen, something she does for effect, much as she speaks Cantonese among people who do not know that tongue. Much as she sits down now and then with a

tambourine or dobro and adds what amounts to a primitive soundtrack to whatever else might be going on at the time. An intimate gathering at a table laid with roast fowl and apricots, say, or an unremitting discussion concerning the substance at the center of the universe -- which, it turns out (after a great deal of contemplation and consideration and heaping glassfuls of vodka) doesn't exist, at least not in the way it was previously thought to exist, but only rather as a kind of shade and simulacra, a puppet show stage on which the puppets are basically impossible to see because of their miniscule dimensions and their habit of wearing clothes nearly indistinguishable from the backdrop. .

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The metallic hum starts up in the morning and doesn't leave off until well past sunset when two or three other residents of the building join me in the hunt for its source. We are not overly meticulous and when the mystery remains unsolved even the following day, it's nothing to write home about, but I choose to write a letter anyway because I haven't heard from anyone in the region by the sea since I chose to leave on the back of a mule, or its modern equivalent -- the pickup truck (in this particular case, one with paneling on the sides). Perhaps someone still possesses photographs

and they can send me one and I can pin it to the corkboard that otherwise houses various recipes that utilize artichokes and Hindu prayers written out longhand. I shouldn't suggest they are authentic, but merely approximate, visions with pachyderms in them (or individuals who share a passing resemblance) and beautiful women with extra sets of arms who have merely to scowl in your direction and the whole world will turn disastrously upside down.

Such visions only visit us, of course, when we are ripe for the message hidden inside them like grain in the husk or an octopus in its jar on the sea floor, when we are ripe for re-ordering, a little confused, but not entirely lost or baffled by what we see in the morning out the window or on our way to work on the highway or the train.

Once we enter into whatever form of elaborate communication is required, whatever odd combination of adverbs and clucking of the tongue, the visions cease to behave as the products of otherworldly or hostile wills and we can expect then to feel comfortable just as long as the humidity stays low and the faucets are all working properly. Which is not to say we are subject ultimately to a physical phenomenon, but to deny its physicality is to work in half-truths and innuendo of the sort we should have abandoned

at the very beginning of the process. When the two hands of the clock were indistinguishable from one another and the air was thick with insults and tobacco smoke and a constant ringing at the very edge of our ability to hear. Almost as if someone had gauged it precisely, had access to our medical records and tests and was using these for nefarious purposes just as anyone else might have if the roles were reversed. If it was they who had installed themselves in the lower floors, in the basement and turned the dials and fought off sleep while nothing too unusual happened. It's hard to imagine, when stuck in the rut of such ghastly ruminations, what the Egyptians were thinking when they too embarked on their own grand and unseemly projects, their pyramids and their obelisks dotting the landscape like enormous pencils. But if you try hard enough you begin to see the finer details as if through a disembodied eye -- one hanging above the turning of the Earth itself where it has been located, apparently, since before the Earth came into existence, before there was even a first object to see or the light with which to illuminate it.

All of this you will, no doubt, chock up to simple hallucination or an intoxication brought on by long hours on the job and the constant bickering of your loved ones. And

you will not be mistaken exactly, but there is also an element of practical verisimilitude at work here – just a grain, mind you, a one twentieth or perhaps one one millionth -- enough to disturb your sleep for a month or two and, in so doing, to infiltrate your dreams and cause to parade about inside them tigers with their black stripes somehow blanched almost entirely white and their fat and corrupted trainers having a go at them with long and vicious whips.

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The most delicate capillary appears bold pastel pink in the scans and makes you wish there were other methods of determining what needs to be determined. Of moving information from one place to another while at the same time disguising intent. If not for the sound of insects we might all be locked interminably inside our own skulls with not so much as a window or a telescope to look through, a possibility perhaps first understood by Philoctetes, rendered half man and half beast by his recent abandonment and brooding over a primitively carved wooden cup in his cave -- after the snake bite, of course, but before his return -- and certainly this bodes well for the rest of us because we can determine for ourselves when to

retreat to the comfort of our own living rooms and when to venture out under skies that roil about threateningly on occasion but rarely unleash anything more harmful than hail the size of a child's fist. Which can do a great deal of damage, to be sure, and cause one's metal roof to sing out in agony, but pretty soon the wind dies down and the sun returns and the escaped parrots pair up in the trees at the end of the lane and make their cacophonous racket until three o'clock in the morning. I have twice threatened to shoot them but no one takes me seriously. They must know the Remington that leans in the corner of the closet rusted up ages ago and is just as likely to explode in my hands as deliver its deadly retort through the branches overhead.

Still, there is something to be said for uttering guttural and nasal and even hissing noises that may or may not contain tangible meaning -- if only because so much of the day and the evening is otherwise ruled by silence you could almost be forgiven for starting to believe silence was perhaps the very essence of everything. The void at the center of all, at the center of everything that is not itself a void or at least appears to be substance, to be something rather than nothing. Even so, the stench arising from that infamous wound is enough to keep others away, keep even your closest associates at a distance of several hundred yards,

and the wound, in modern medical terms at any rate, is not all that serious. Sometimes the effect is the same whether a part of the body has been injured or not and then what you have is allegory, a sneaking about behind language as if it were a shield or a bunch of cattails and you were submerged up to your neck in slimy pond water. Or a fast – flowing stream, it doesn't matter. Once in this territory there is no going back and the body and the physical world through which it moves take on the character of silk disturbed by the rhythmic movements of a ceiling fan overhead, or individual bits of paper (the pages of a book, say) passing one after another rapidly past the end of one's thumb.

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Gold appears brassy and discolored here, a figment of the mundane imagination better suited to conjuring cartoon characters and marching bands. Acres and acres of it, following a thin ribbony route laid out by runoff from the monsoons over countless generations in an area still supporting, for all that, wildlife of great diversity. Antelope and lizards with names that originate on other continents, names that sound to our ears like either admonishments or high praise. I track the movement of the pain from one



quadrant of my body to another using a metric I developed the last time I began to suffer these symptoms. It is complex and precise and I make it available at no charge for those who have spent four or five months out of the year at sea, pulling up lobsterpots and scrambling through the rigging as if they had been born in a kind of spider web.

You never know really where the symptoms come from or what exactly they mean. The specialists are too far away to consult – over the ridge and past the water treatment plants – their offices decorated with ferns and nothing else. No photographs, no posters of athletic stars or their conquistador precursors from centuries back. When I made that journey in the past, the doors were always locked and the window shades drawn but you could hear a great deal of racket inside, human voices celebrating the triumph of the spirit over the body. Champagne corks popping. The very difficult to discern rustle of confetti in the air or landing (in volume) on desks, lampshades, and chairs. Better to track the progress from your own front porch where the sunlight never seems satisfied to remain stationary but must forever be moving restlessly from one place to another, a few inches at a time. Then, before you know it, you look up and the water towers have changed their visible colors from metallic to amber to chartreuse sometimes, but

you can never quite pinpoint the moment of transformation, never quite identify the boundary, no matter how intensely you gaze or how frequently you open the shutter on your fancy camera on its rudimentary tripod. Which may have been a gift from a relative long since in the ground, or it may simply have been an impulse purchase when you had set out to acquire something else. A handgun, say, or a packet of matches. Funny how our instincts play us false at precisely the moment when they are most necessary, when the thunderclap breaks through the numbing regularity of the sprinkler on the front lawn and the radio is alive with reports of money being made hand-over-fist in foreign markets by those who first learned of them by going to school. By paying attention to the whispers and the meaningful nods and glances and ignoring completely the textbooks with their modern full page color printing and their lengthy lists of editors in the masthead, lists with familiar names, like Cunningham.

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The professional forger of art admits of no imperfections even as the observers who have come from miles around catalog and list and make comment over their apricot brandy. The din is such as might make an introvert quiver,

simple guffaws and numerous clearings of the throat notwithstanding, and the whole scene is preserved for posterity by a surveillance camera mounted in the northeast corner. Eulalie appears briefly, her silhouette just visible through the branches of a tree that doesn't look like any that actually grow in this vicinity, perhaps due to the rough brush strokes or our almost universal ignorance concerning species that don't invest most of their energy in locomotion or rapid color change. In appearing larger than they actually are. Apropos of nothing – certainly not the wainscoting, the numerous long index fingers pointed in mute accusation -- she claims her headaches have returned and then smiles winsomely. The glass in the windows vibrates subtly as if it too were here to make comment, to draw our attention to the otherwise easily misunderstood aspects, like the repetition of basic checkerboard patterns. Or is that houndstooth? And yes, my reaction is blunted, but that is because I had seen it all coming ahead of time and I tried to retreat. Honestly, I did. I even tried, in desperation, to make my way into the desert canyons that lie east of here but the coyotes chased me out. And the cold nights. And the sense that I was alone. And the realization that no matter where I went, I would not, in fact, be alone but would be surrounded at all times by both the temporal and

the remembered. By sentient beings and rote formulas often assuming the same guise, a truly intolerable dilemma.

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Our best representations, those we spend hours and days and years creating and perfecting, never quite stand up to scrutiny,. They never can quite get themselves to the major leagues where (let's face it) they would most likely be obliterated anyway. They would dissolve under the weight of their own shame. Maybe it's time I speak of Eulalie the way I speak of people I do not know – with exaggerated courtesy and a pronounced accent modeled on that I stumbled on once at the docks where short, exotic-looking men were busy unloading shipments of transistor radios and enormous boxes of squash that had seen better days. She isn't stupid. You can see her walking the rooftops come twilight, gliding across them as if she were the lower portions, the straggling bits, of a cloud formation. I call out to her, afraid this will be it, that her recklessness and grace will fuse into a single incomprehensible thing and I will be left to explain it to those who never had a chance to witness it firsthand for themselves. Who heard rumors and spread them and altered them in the process, without ever once being privy to the woman who started them all simply by

virtue of her moving from one place to another, or even just by standing still. Eulalie knew, at a certain level, the difference is so slight it makes no sense to register it. It makes no sense even to get out of bed.

The first word I type in my attempt to say what needs to be said, to explain to these late comers what it is they have missed, is “walleyed”; I stop for a moment to try to collect my thoughts, to figure out a way to justify that choice and all the others that will follow it. It’s almost as if I am afraid they will gang up together and destroy the effect each has made individually. A group suicide, a bit of collective madness like that which causes a community to burn certain of its members as witches and causes others to believe the weather itself can be manipulated by flying an airplane through the upper reaches of the atmosphere and seeding the clouds there with salt and other minerals, with the scoundrel’s equivalent of prayer.

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The ingredients all come from the north where the soils are listed in the almanacs as acidic but not overly so. The kind of soils that ward off pests simply by virtue of their habit of getting in the nostrils and staying there, of inducing terribly vivid nightmares. But who knows what the lesser beings see

when they close their lids (assuming they have lids, or even rudimentary eyes which need protecting). An educated guess brings one to the edge of the precipice. The goal is, despite what other commentators will inevitably tell you, to peer over that edge and make yourself lose your equilibrium. Otherwise, the structure wouldn't be there; it wouldn't exist at all except as an accident of geography, which, at this late stage, we simply can not accept as a genuine phenomenon. Even the existence of the magnetic poles answers some need so deep inside us you couldn't pinpoint it if you tried, if you used one of those donut-shaped machines that harness the power of magnetism and use it to peer inside living tissues and split, virtually, our otherwise intact bones. I should know, as the pain recently subsided and in its place there was a gray entity without a name and without substance but it still registered. It brought its own sense of existence to the table the way you might bring a bottle of chianti, or the way ducks have to bring their wings with them wherever they go.

I drift off momentarily, and in my dream, I run my hands over a saddle not attached to any horse and I pull them away almost immediately, horrified by the feel of the desiccated leather but enchanted for all that by the spirals and other arabesques hand-carved at the edges. Who could

ask for anything more spectacular without, in the process, sounding like an ungrateful fool, or at least a lion tamer suddenly in thrall to the dictates of reason after a lifetime of fleeing in the opposite direction? Toward the mountaintops and the spider webs outlined dramatically (if somewhat pretentiously) by thousands of quicksilver droplets of dew? Maybe our sensitivity to such patterns, our out-and-out shrieking in their presence and the widening of the eyes and the clenching of the fists unconsciously, grows out of the dawn of the race itself, emerges from two hundred thousand years in hiding and knocks on the front door because it has had no luck knocking down the back. In splintering the wood there and bending the hinges, or, through another tactic no less mythical in origin, if a little less common across the board, creating primitive tunes on a notched length of reed.

Maybe it's all hallucination caused by sitting still too long, by endeavoring to occupy a single barely extended space for days on end because all the other spaces are difficult to get to and they threaten to swallow you up once you do get there, to make you vanish like bits of plankton down the maw of a whale. But this shouldn't ring alarm bells or induce despair. It is just raw factual reportage to be interpreted however you see fit. With the assistance of hymnals and

cigars and the casual drone of the ceiling fan which shifts and warbles with the weight of its own loosely combined parts in motion. I pull a pair of scissors from the drawer and have at a blank piece of paper, hoping to accomplish what, I'm not sure. Within a matter of seconds, a vague shape like a plesiosaur appears but I destroy it almost immediately through carelessness rather than irritation. It is a bad habit and I wish to eradicate it, but I haven't the slightest idea as to how to go about eradicating that which defines one without in the process eradicating the concept of identity itself. Without changing the parameters and equations, the numeric foundations upon which everything else is built. Odd, how we must accept certain laws as inevitable when clearly all physical laws were intended to be mutable, to yield to our desires and inclinations because how else to explain those desires and inclinations? How else to explain how they could have come into being in the first place? The trick, I suspect, is to burden every object you identify with the properties of every other possible object you can imagine so that the physical turns immediately into the ephemeral, and vice versa – the curtain rods tasked suddenly with more than just keeping the curtains off the floor, the sun slowed in its apparent orbit by the weight of nursery rhymes and raw vegetables, by our memories of the



living and the recently and not so recently deceased. In this way, we ensure ourselves a place in the cosmos if for no other reason than that cosmos is, by definition, constructed almost entirely of our lists and our dull pantomimes and eventually our voices pitched to such an hysterical racket they resemble those of the small birds -- the starlings and the sparrows -- who make their nests in our eaves come early spring and no matter what we do to discourage them -- spray the area with bleach, carve images of predatory owls and falcons from old hunks of tree stump -- they settle in for the season. They rear their young and thoroughly soil the front porch and then they too are gone again, remnants of some past so familiar we begin to confuse it with the present, with that which we can not hope to escape, and as such, eventually, we go to live in it gladly because the alternative has no depth, no nuance or meaning. Just a continuous flood of things and events, of empty sense data and impressions, a flood that never pauses long enough for us to capture any of it on paper. Which is not to say there aren't those who will try -- and who tend to render themselves, unfortunately, lunatics in the process. Snarling and wiping their eyes. Hissing their endless incoherent sentences at anyone who happens to get too close. In the street, say. Or in the bedroom where the consequences, as

you may imagine, are both laughable and dire. Just the sort of thing that might get us believing once again in pity.

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Of the several different heads appearing in the tv's rectangle, one exploits her husband's death for personal gain and weeps profusely until the make up around her eyes runs in nebulous patterns and reminds one (because the sound is low) of the galaxies spinning out of control in all directions. How difficult is it to see past the atmosphere when all you have is your own eyes and maybe a few of the instruments designed to make them more powerful in measurable and significant ways, but which wind up diminishing their innate capacity through overuse until we are wandering around bumping into walls and parked cars and we request assistance from those who would rather act as if we did not exist, as if we were specters conjured up from the pages of well-known children's books like *Pinocchio* or the *Book of Job*. The best method of dealing with us, apparently, is neither showing contempt nor practicing immersion but pursuing the steady and stubborn composition of rival narratives. That's why you'll see them scribbling in the corners on napkins or envelopes, whatever comes to hand. That's why you'll see them muttering to

themselves even while helming the yacht, while practicing the tango at the civic center where the air conditioner has broken and everyone present is forced to wipe repeatedly the perspiration from his or her upper lip with a casual swipe of the forearm. It's not like we haven't been warned. My hands shake as I pull the bottle of glue from its usual place in the cabinet and try to affix the photographs I have cut from the weeklies to the large piece of cardboard I rescued from its place of misery in the cattails and the trickle of copper-tinted water in the ditch beside the road. Who knows how long it had been there, how long it would have survived as cardboard before being altered chemically by the elements into something completely other? Something incapable of backing an image or forcing it to remain straight instead of wrinkling up which is its natural inclination. I'm not sure why the shaking, whether it arises from nerves or too much salt, but I know once it starts it will continue indefinitely. It will haunt my dreams at night, make of them barely audible demands for order and peace (and not quiet so much as the idea of quiet, the pursuit of which might require any number of distracting noises like the turning of pages or the incessant mumbling to one's self under the breath), all amid the tumbling of enormous stones from the canyon walls overhead, the screeching of

eagles imported from the Caucasus region to replenish our own long since depleted by chemicals used to treat the dandelions but which also thinned somehow the shells of their eggs until nothing could be kept in or out. It was as if there was no egg there at all, just a rumor of membrane, a demarcation in name and concept only. Those recently arrived, I suppose, are immune, or they put little enough importance on separating themselves from the surrounding environment even at the most vulnerable of stages, which would explain the constant shrieking, the announcing to all and sundry that they are forever in pain.

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Purpose is a concept belonging to other ages, other areas remote from our own by virtue of the snowcaps and the vines crawling up the trunks of the trees, endeavoring to strangle the life from them without in the process considering how they will anchor themselves afterward, how they will continue to march ineluctably skyward. When Eulalie comes, she utters phrases in other languages as if trying deliberately to confuse me, as if she thinks I will leave these four walls and journey to the other side of the Earth just to track down their origins, an act of desperation and jealousy not altogether unprecedented, really, when you

consider my past, my failures to rein in the worst sides of myself like wayward elephants. Still, her expectations must of necessity meet with disappointment and frustration because if they don't, I am saddled for, on average, thirty-seven days, until her next visit, with the feeling of having been soundly defeated, chased into the underbrush where the only viable means of escape are the holes the rodents and the reptiles dig themselves by way of shelter. She examines the bits of paper lying around and knows immediately they are not haphazard, not meaningless bits of detritus left by accident and my naturally slovenly ways, but the beginnings of something much more meaningful and enormous, something that threatens to take her place, to relegate her once and for all to the back pages where the appendices pile up one on top of another and the lists and phrases contained within them melt together into unrecognizable conglomerates due to the increasing pressure, the heat that comes from both inside and out (meaning I have turned the air conditioning down just to watch her sweat, but the unforeseen consequences make themselves felt even months afterward, popping up now and then unexpectedly like tropical thunderstorms and wreaking their havoc before dissipating under their own unstable momentum). Our fears and insecurities increase, I

suppose, with age, numbering into the thousands, but, mercifully in most cases, their intensity fades until they are merely a whirling mass of undifferentiated substances somewhere just beneath the skin and you can't eliminate them just by pretending they aren't there, but you can come to think of them as an integral part of yourself, as crucial as the capillaries above which they swarm, as crucial as the bones that allow you to move from one room to another when the first has become so associated with one of these fears that it ceases to function primarily as a demarcated space. Rather it is a sign and a warning and the only way to enter it again in the future is to heed that warning and cross yourself or take to drinking enormous quantities of brandy or just talking to yourself as if you had momentarily lost your power of reason. Eulalie makes a show of crumbling several of the fragments of paper up in her fist and then watching intently my reactions, checking to see if I will give anything away by the movement of the muscles underneath the skin of my face. But I have been practicing for just such an occasion and, as near as I can tell, nothing of substance escapes. For the first and only time in my life, I manage to remain a cypher. She frowns as if I have just announced my retirement or that the windows need a good scrubbing, and she tosses the mangled fragments

behind the couch where it will be very difficult for me to retrieve them again without resorting to physical labor. Picturing this makes her laugh out loud unkindly and that sound is still ringing in my ears several hours later, after she has gone and while my hands are itching uncontrollably and the blood has finally begun to slacken its efforts to claw its way free of the veins and the arteries that almost always do such a masterful job containing it.

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Search the back shadowy corners where the used up bits of candle and other rubbish get under your feet and cause you to lose your balance momentarily. You still won't find it, won't find it in the shrubs that haven't been tended in weeks, maybe all season. They throw their desperate tentacles out in all directions, grabbing for who knows what, maybe the light. Certainly, the light. What else could it be? The reference is to an ancient Malayan folk tale with witches in it, a folk tale that no longer strikes fear in the heart, unless of course you are a bit emotionally unstable or have just passed through a rigorous physical training program in preparation for the military or just a jaunt overseas, and your heart has been weakened noticeably. It throbs in your chest like an angry animal. A groundhog, say.

It's hard to tell who is telling the truth in the room and who is averting his gaze so as to suggest the truth has become a little bit embarrassing, something to hide away in a box in the closet for years until you realize that nothing really belongs out in the light of day, nothing is worth crowing about, so to speak, and so all pressure is off. You are free to be mediocre again, to wander around the poorly-maintained paths that crisscross the grounds, with the fading geraniums and the little brass sculptures of people you know you should recognize, people who have risen from the depths of the national consciousness like cetaceans boiling up to the surface of the sea while feeding, but when you stop long enough to take a look, to scrape out the depths of the copper pot that is your memory, and even quiz passersby with a notepad and pencil in your hand, you inevitably come up empty. Which, I suspect, is the whole purpose of the installation.

Herein vertigo, a deep sense of our own inadequacies, is made palpable so as to shame us into action or inaction, whichever is most desirable to those who spent the money in the first place. The what? Half a million dollars? Yet one more reason to shy away from the great outdoors, if you ask me. Not long after experiencing that place for myself, after ignoring my own principles and hopping the bus, I



dream I am falling down an old mineshaft. Just when it seems my heart is going to give way from fear and the lack of firm foundation, I land gently on a mattress laid out thoughtfully at the bottom by the three or four people who have not been so lucky and who have arrived before me. I offer my profuse thanks, but they have been rendered blind and deaf by the descent and their own catastrophic landing. What to do? What to say? Funny, how we invent obligations when none present themselves as pending, like using utensils instead of our fingers when almost all of ancient and modern history clearly calls for the latter. It has a way of going on about its likes and desires like this until we have to plug our ears, we have to pretend as if it hasn't entered the room. And even then, our ability to escape the onslaught is determined by forces outside our control. The pitch of the moon and the state of the tides that stand between us and the rocky outcropping where shelter is available for a nominal fee, but the racket kicked up by the house band (a combination of outdated reggae and electronic experimentation that sounds to the uninitiated ear like the warbling of distressed song birds or the pings of sonar writ large on the canvas of the universe itself) keeps you up at night. The next morning you are apt to feel as if the entire adventure was a mistake, an attempt to make it

seem as if you are more daring and interesting than you actually are (a flaw every one of us is born with and will take to our graves, where, who knows?, it might even continue), more likely to sample the raw sea urchin or hold hands with someone you barely know under the table, when in fact the lining of your stomach is already aflame and you're not entirely comfortable with the look of that raised red patch that shows up unexpectedly on the skin of your elbows after too much time spent crawling around on the floor.

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Yellow hues predominate, catch the eye and turn it outward to the point where visitors are temporarily blinded. The fear associated with this outcome builds to almost unimaginable heights and you can hear the whimpering from around the corner. You can almost catch it expanding in your own throat. Maybe the intent doesn't quite cohere with the consequences, but that is no reason to let the original installation off the hook. Those behind it are as culpable as grizzly bears and we need to make clear our concerns and remedies at the meetings they hold downtown on occasion, at the Waldorf which looks as if it has been trucked in from the Middle Ages. I know any attempt at emulation is bound to fail but then what else am I going to do now that the

school year is over and the children congregate in large numbers like penguin colonies and smoke their cigarettes and tell their stories that, even from the distance of two hundred or more yards and through the natural aural obstruction of the neighborhood's rotten fences and the screens in my window, sound as if they might last forever, as if they might give the *Mahabharata* a run for its money. Some mornings, as I am twisting and tearing bits of paper into ever smaller configurations in hopes of finding there my inspiration, in hopes of discovering what it is I am supposed to be doing in the parsing out of miniscule space, I start to wonder what Eulalie might be up to during those long intervals when she is absent, when she disappears like Latin,, but I know this mode of inquiry will lead only to profound and unrelenting despair, to a doubting of everything that otherwise seems solid. The rotation of the planet, the ink in the body of the pen. I might as well just turn off all circuitry, allow the motion of the fingers themselves while engaged in their meaningless task to overwhelm and inundate the cosmos, especially that portion of it owing its existence to the untoward throbbing of my mind. And sure, the pain is enormous upon any extinction, the screaming of the obliterated nerve fibers, the ganglia and the axons tasked with the holding of

sentience in place as if it were a captive horse. But the suffering it replaces is the size of a mountain if by mountain you mean one of those structures that obscures the sightlines on the plains and not a hillock of the sort we refer to as a mountain around here, where such structures have been denuded by time and natural processes until there are places on them now for overgrowth, for fir trees in their millions and moss in the summer, for streams to wash over their faces gently, without calling undo attention to themselves by making a great deal of noise and plummeting a thousand feet to their terminus. I succeed mostly, but there are moments when the paper beneath the tips of my fingers begins to feel for some reason like the texture of her skin and I imagine (I can't help it; the images arise without true prompting like dragons and begin their dreadful breathing) other skin, unknown skin next to hers in patterned arrangement and movement recognizable as movement of a certain kind, as the thrill and enjoyment of otherwise inert flesh through both movement and sight. And then there is little help for it. The weeping ceases after a few minutes and never quite manages to reach anything close to what might reasonably be termed a crescendo, a symphony of grief. It is mostly, I imagine, just shame dabbed about the eyes like mascara, a thing to be hidden,

unseen if administered correctly, while still leaving its mark on the unconscious regions of the brain. And then, afterward, low and behold, an origami rhinoceros emerges -- its miniature horn curved like the crescent moon.

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With a little effort, we can see the ghostly outline of what they used to call predestination hovering over its own carcass and we can laugh a little under our breath as if we had predicted this calamity, but the truth is we still believe in it halfheartedly and we walk around as if we are forever trying to live our lives according to its dictates while at the same time spitting the seed husks from our lips where they have a tendency to accumulate. I'm not one to gloat and the change in temperature sends me spiraling into a panic and a lethargy that ought logically to cancel one another out, but strangely, they work in concert until I am certain any hallucination that comes my way by virtue of the brain lesions and the consumption of too much mediocre bourbon has as its center a germ of truth (if you want to call it that; if you are feeling particularly lazy), but knowing this and proving it are two very different propositions. Hence the whole of a recent Tuesday spent with a pencil in my hand and the large pieces of paper, those that haven't yet

been torn and manipulated and shredded for the usual purposes. I trace each nominal vision back to its origins as best I can, and my technique is neither flashy nor particularly precise. It is something I picked up over the years of watching the cowboys in the movies that used to appear late at night on tv, with their lariats made to accomplish all sorts of practical activities like separate a single cow from the rest of the herd or pop the delicate if somewhat treacherous head off the body of a rattlesnake. In the same vein, I draw pictures of what appear to be individual human beings in various states of undress, and I draw lines out from each of them in several quadrants to indicate that their shape or movement or attributes are not entirely accidental. They have been created just so as illustration and warning and await labels (in complete sentences) to be affixed to the end of each of these lines as a clear signal that they have completed their task. That thing for which they came into existence in the first place. Futility is no reason to abandon the procedure and when I receive letters in the mail claiming otherwise, I am forced to abandon the project only momentarily so as to formulate a vigorous response, but occasionally I get sidetracked and digress and the rationalizations and quoting at length of anecdotes concerning Diogenes – most forcefully that bit

about his having no servants and so whoever wishes to inherit his jar house will be forced to carry him to his grave upon his death – take up a day and then several days and sometimes a week and by that time I am so thoroughly exhausted as to tear it all up in frustration and prepare to start over again. All of this, of course, requires a great deal of peeling of fruit and toasting of bread and consuming it all in the intervals between scribbling and tearing, and as you can imagine, as a result, I have grown more than just a little corpulent. My head is the size of a boulder and my feet like two domesticated beasts of the sort you see sometimes staked to a wagon out in the middle of an otherwise empty field.

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How many materials to choose from, how many versions of events long since lost to the mists of time and alcohol and the surface of the pond when the ambient temperature drops? The battery stands alone in the middle of an expanse of sand so enormous as to intimidate the imagination, causing it to sink down within itself like a turtle as a matter of self-preservation, a way of clinging to one last desperate bit of stagecraft and instinct as if it too had been written beforehand and checked and double-checked for factual

errors and a certain kind plagiarism (that applying to the written rules undergirding the natural world itself). I see myself trudging along for hours, leaving footprints that transform in the heat into barely recognizable patterns – blueprints for the outer cosmos as far as we know, if as current theory holds, that cosmos originates in information rather than matter, in ones and zeroes arranged in complex geographies we are only just beginning to map because previously we had been concentrating on the human heart, which doesn't exactly challenge us anymore but it hasn't given up on us entirely either. It is like one of those toy cubes you try to get all the colors on the same side of by twisting it and watching how others have accomplished the task before you. Out of the corner of your eye so that they remain unaware of what you are doing. They refrain from taking vengeance because the cost is so high.

I kick at the side of the battery because it is much too heavy to lift and I have been weakened beyond all reason by the heat which moves the air in waves everywhere you look, pulls it up from the ground in waves and curtains and all the lizards can do is watch mesmerized from their perches on the red sandstone, their eyes looking off in two different directions at once, seemingly so as not miss a single precious detail. There are tracks on the sand where the



stones and even, yes. the battery itself have apparently been moving. You can follow their progress over the course of a half a mile at least and there are those who try to explain the phenomenon using charts and calculations of the sort that originally got our astronauts in space, but which seem now strangely old-fashioned, like figures drawn up on the chalkboard adorning the inside of a candy store. Their efforts make me yawn when I can be troubled to react in any way at all, and then, as if they had been expecting this, there is a great deal of shouting, of pointing fingers and calling names, only some of which I understand. Maybe our best work is behind us now, the future nothing but a series of catastrophic failures that involve the joints of the body and our inability to identify the hypotenuse of a triangle when it is staring us right in the face! As a result, I can see now some giant on the horizon, stumbling about lost and alone but still magnificent for all that, toting that battery around with him as if it were his diary, some place to keep the great secrets all of us keep. Concerning desire and how we'd be better off without it and how it sticks around just the same, completely oblivious to our wishes. How it transforms itself sometimes into fears and joys we have no names for, no means of telling one from another so steep are their terrains, and yet desire always comes back in the

end to reformulate itself out of all of these and out of nothing at the same time, to insist on its own absolute right to exist the way the sun exists and the moon exists, as well as all the numberless empty spaces between them.

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Eulalie's suggestion catches me off guard, coming as it does from the side of her mouth where deceit usually originates and a certain amount of drool which she rarely is aware of perhaps due to the perpetual course of antibiotics the doctors have her on or the desire that simmers just beneath the surface, a desire for all things, an avariciousness that reminds one of a reptile's or a pharaoh's and which brings her in line in my opinion with all the other forces of nature which deserve that appellation – the movement of Mars, the tidal basins with their starfish scurrying imperceptibly for cover. She is aware my own past has disintegrated, has fallen into wet pieces of paper before my eyes and whenever I try to put it back together in the hopes of taking my place among the others who fill up more than their fair share of space, who feel it incumbent upon themselves to rattle around to the far corners of the globe and as a result to their own inner great walls of China, the results are soggy and slow and without form and they stick to the fingers

instead of the mind and they won't let go, but not in a good way. More in the way one imagines in the case of leeches or poorly mixed paper mâché stuck to the face when one is trying to construct a mask for the entertainment of the children.

For her part, Eulalie relegates the past to a region shared with pre-calculus homework and boils on the most delicate stretches of skin. She speaks of it in the third person as if it had offended her in some way and she wishes neither to seek her revenge nor forgive outright but to torment indefinitely and brutally through a fixed regimen of disregard. It is a technique she wields against actual human beings with great aplomb and I'm wondering if perhaps she might not succeed. At any rate, it is her notion that takes root, that suggests to me that the bits of paper I have been molding and tearing and manipulating for reasons that have heretofore escaped me much the way the actual make up of gravity escapes me or its purpose or why we are reminded of its existence every time we stub our toes, might be more than the results of simple nervous habit, might have more to their essence than just keeping my slightly deformed fingers busy. Perhaps, she says, they are stand-ins for everything that has ever happened to me and which I have conveniently let slide into the fog of

nonexistence either through habit, genetics, or the painful desire to perpetually start over, to recognize that I have never quite done or seen anything that approaches the acceptable, let alone the perfect. The secret then is to let these diminutive fragments, whatever form or chaos I twist them into, whatever human face or wing or constellation I ink upon their surface, speak for what has been and what has not been because their eloquence has at least as good a chance at getting through as anything I might have said with actual words and phrases in the meantime. Origami as autobiography, once you figure out how to make it speak, how to translate or perhaps forego translation altogether in favor of the rhetoric of the altered thing itself, that which has been tampered with and then abandoned.

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The utterance sounds affected, even mildly childish, from where we sit beneath the overhanging branches of the sycamore trees or the willows whose countenances remind us of certain elderly relatives who have since made the journey home – in their own words – though we are welcome to doubt the accuracy of the phrase. In fact, we are all but encouraged given the echoes of hymns that no longer seem familiar, the ideas and emotions spawned by a

set of circumstances that belong entirely to the past now and can no more be drudged up safely from their abysmal hiding places than we can be lowered down with a rope. My ears ache from the time I wake up, and the remedy, I know, exists somewhere in the pages of the library that surrounds me when I choose to spend the day in this particular space, but the organization I originally imposed eludes me now the way the significance of my own middle name eludes me, and I know an hour or two spent searching will simply cause the discomfort to increase until it all but takes over the senses. It will inundate them like a wave from the sea caused by the violent shifting of the earth underneath, and spill over the walls erected ahead of time to keep one element away from the other, to separate that which should remain solid from that which should remain liquid, according to the old ways of interpreting the world and our unsteady place in it. Perhaps instead of searching for balance of some sort, of engendering forever the number two, we should seek to embrace an unlimited number, a veritable chaos and infinity as the best means of understanding what is going on around us, and if understanding is too particular a word, then we ought to jettison it as quickly as we have all the others. We ought to send it hurtling toward the clouds and the satellites ambling

past as if they hadn't witnessed a thing, as if they were mere accidental phenomena on par with skin tags and the clutter and "noise" one sees on the radar scope when the beam originates in a crowded metropolitan area. Eventually, I seek relief by placing a wet piece of paper in either ear and laying my head back on the chair to allow the moisture and the temperatures slightly cooler than the ambient air around me to penetrate slowly and deeply into the afflicted orifices and soothe by virtue of the change. At least this is the theory I am operating on, and, at first, it seems sound, it seems to work because the discomfort is replaced momentarily by the distinct sound of bells ringing as if from some unseen platform on high where the residents are required apparently as part of their penance or the earning of their livelihoods and sustenance to whack these bells with solid implements. The relief, though, is temporary and replaced within minutes by the muting of all sound – bell-like or otherwise – and the sudden intensification of nerve pain like that which occurs when a virus which has lain dormant for twenty years or more in the ganglia behind the ear or in the lower back, content, it seems, to live out its life as a simple passenger, responds to a catalyst of some sort (the exact nature of which can perhaps never been known – due to the sheer number of possible culprits and the ever

present specter of coincidence standing haughtily at the door) and springs into action, replicating suddenly in overwhelming numbers like sand fleas and rushing out again along the pathways of the blood stream and nerve fibers to eventually cause whatever sort of excruciating and permanent physical damage it is a virus is prone to cause.

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The search for something that no longer exists takes approximately three and a half weeks, but the reverberations can last a lifetime if you allow it, if you keep bringing up the past as if it were a film starring one of those seemingly incorruptible souls who appear now and then out of nowhere and turn the industry on its head by virtue of their refusal to portray certain well-known Biblical characters or vulnerable street urchins (which, when you get right down to it, amounts to the same thing). Our clutching at the hem, at the peripheral artifacts, does nothing to stem the tide and before you know it entire neighborhoods have been converted to what amounts to a cult by little more than the airtight persuasiveness of the arguments they encounter and the glossy art in the literature they are provided. Which is not to suggest the outcome was ever in doubt. In a manner of speaking (the

same manner as you may experience when you spend the weekend in Santa Fe, say, and listen to the others around you in the main square or in the numerous taverns instead of talking endlessly to yourself as is your wont), it is locked up still in the vault that has been labeled with masking tape and a ball point pen and you can still see for yourself the contents, so long as you have the combination and the windows have not been fogged up overly by the relentless crush of visitors, or more precisely, the vapor they emit as a natural byproduct of the process of respiration. I'm afraid I can't be any clearer on this account without resorting to the sort of syntax that hurtles us all instantly back to that era when our epics and our tall tales and our resumes centered mainly around ourselves and when we tried to expand them, to take into account the experience and the wisdom of all those other people who happen to share the planet with us, or at least that small portion of it that we recognize due to our inhabiting it more or less continuously from about the age of five, the failures are so numerous, so obvious and ultimately stultifying, they can't be added up even when using the fingers on both hands. They tend to revolve around the notion that other people string together ideas at such a breakneck clip, you'd think they weren't actually human beings at all, but computational devices of



the sort that haven't been improved upon since the time of the abacus. They share these ideas among one another effortlessly and with aplomb and you have to wonder after a while if what they are spouting really qualifies as legitimate conceptual thought when it refuses to avail itself of the sort of content normally associated with that kind of thought (since the eighteenth century anyway, crawling as it was with its flaneurs and its remarkably well-read military personnel and, of course, its encyclopedists of every stripe) – namely the difficulties, nay, impossibilities, inherent in proving the existence of multiple separate entities in a cosmos generally believed to be unified and singular, as can be deduced given the definition of the term itself, and even the way in which it is bandied about to this day by people who refuse to acknowledge that what they are referring to has any but the most distant relation to their everyday lives, the way oxygen is said to be relatively abundant in the atmosphere which we breathe but none of us has ever actually seen it. It remains, for all practical purposes, merely a footnote in a chemistry book or, occasionally, a confession.

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The window across the way conceals someone of interest, Immanuel, I suspect, though I have no proof. All I know is the regular movements of the shade releasing and concealing the light at intervals suggests a code of some sort, one I am still in the process of cracking. We know the way words present themselves in other guises and we try to mimic the phenomenon by wearing hats and telling people we don't know that we are called by a name that is not in actuality our own. We invent it on the spot or search through old novels looking for one that resonates for reasons we can't quite put our finger on. Perhaps it is an audible experience solely and any attempt to find deeper semantic explanations for it are bound to fail, but why should that matter? Why turn around on our heels and head for the door when the door merely opens out upon a scene that reminds us of what we just left behind? The red cedar wood, the small animals scurrying about for cover as if they are afraid their countenances, ruddy or otherwise, devious or malformed, will offend us hopelessly, will turn us forever against the others of their kind that never even ventured out in the open in the first place, that never bothered to risk being seen. It's entirely possible that what we imagine at moments like this – the clap of thunder and the precipitate lightning bolt cutting its way across the sky

in measurable increments, in stages that borrow their symmetry from the equations we use to explain them after the fact; the voices lifting up from unseen grottoes in clusters of two and three dozen so that they are no longer voices at all but animate conglomerations, feral entities, beings like sponges sprung from the deep and composed of numberless individuals in colony form – has been altered fundamentally by the books we read, or better yet, those we haven't managed to read yet, those we have simply placed on a list with the intention of returning someday to have at their contents but which have in the meantime entirely slipped our minds. They may have come recommended by friends when we still had friends (before we replaced them with the bottle with gray liquid in it, and sometimes the green), but more likely they turned up in passing in the pages of other books that concern themselves with the coming and going of pirates, say, or the decadence of early twentieth century Berlin. At any rate, we will be forced, as usual, to tell ourselves it is all simply a matter of invention, of the fertile crescent to be found in the region of the amygdala; otherwise, how will we sleep at night, how we will manage to walk across the square in the morning (when the light is so intense it begins to bring on darkness!) and purchase a newspaper and nod at the

passersby who all seem familiar somehow, as if they have ventured this way before at exactly the same time we have, as if they have been waiting patiently for our arrival and once they see us on the horizon, in shadow form only, for the distances we are speaking of are already in the neighborhood of a mile, they make ready to come into view themselves, to walk at an angle set out ahead of time carefully by those in charge of the ruse, those who might even now be observing from behind a cupola a hundred feet or more in the air and chuckling to themselves at the impression they must have succeeded in making because everything makes an impression on everything else, doesn't it? And to imagine that all of this could take place with no noticeable effect at all is akin to suggesting that the moon and the stars are merely hunks of inorganic matter hovering about harmlessly in the sky.

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Negation raises further complications as though it were an Attic philosopher unhappy in his marriage, but our refusal to come any closer to it once it has reared its head just means that there is something there to be witnessed – an event much like the rising of the morning sun or an artwork missing the traditional accouterments meant to announce

to all the world what exactly it is. I favor doing away with the whole gamut of such strategies and easy categories and the necessarily apathetic responses to them, but in this I am greatly outnumbered and choose to voice my concerns only in the privacy of my own study where no one is listening, no one is even bothering to boil the water for tea. The dimensions are familiar to anyone who has spent the night in a shed because the weather turned ferocious suddenly and the sky, which had previously been alight with constellations and the occasional passing satellite became something unrecognizable, foreign and atavistic. It rebuffed scrutiny with the same belligerence and intensity once expects of the briny deep. On this shelf and that, scattered about haphazardly as if they are afterthoughts in an otherwise concentrated stream of cognition focused on the solving of a particularly difficult mathematical problem, say, or the retrieving of memories eight and more years away, open envelopes testify to the fact that I am not entirely isolated, that business transactions, most notably those that require payment for the continuance of light and heat on the premises, occupy someone's time, perhaps even mine. It's not that I am terribly forgetful or, worse, unwilling to keep track of what I do from one day to the next, but sometimes we are required to clean the slate, as it were, to

wipe it clean with solvent and castoff kitchen rags. Our dignity demands nothing less than the appearance of having come into existence no more than twenty minutes prior to the present moment and our demeanor must, as a consequence, be that of a reptile on its sun-soaked rock or a statue in the garden that was placed there by the previous owners for reasons that can't be gleaned no manner how closely you study its likeness to a famous military figure from the past you can't quite put your finger on or the relevant paperwork stacked up in the top of the nearby closet. Lately, my father's presence for some reason infiltrates the silent day, a simulacra of his witticisms and refreshing nihilism popping up out of nowhere and filling the room the way food coloring takes over the bowl, spreading from a tiny dot in the middle of whatever liquid has yet to find its appropriate hue outward ineluctably toward the borders in swirls and patterns that suggest human faces or patches of swampland laden with predatory birds. His words are no more tangible now than the flesh on his arms but they exist nonetheless and filter their way in through the side of the head and I can't help but smile even when he's gone these five years because the world had once contained him the way it now contains me and we had shared some of it together in overlapping fashion -- a

diagram with circles meeting in the middle -- and when I too am gone where will my words be, how will they infiltrate the room and the silence in the room when I am not in the habit of uttering them out loud, when I can't even bring myself to form them for an anticipatory moment on the thick middle portion of my tongue?

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A weed no longer than a section of your finger, a promise as yet to be fulfilled but carrying nonetheless all the potential of future civilizations in it if only we could figure out how to expand its overall mass and distribute it without resorting to donkey carts and fetid bodies of water. Faux modern chemistry with its reliance on spectrometers and amino acids might offer some hope, but usually it just mires us further in despair without really meaning to, almost as a byproduct of its careless implementation and our own tendency to drift away from it aimlessly, caught up in the idea that nothing really makes any sense unless you twist it around, unless you mold it after your own will even if that entails breaking the thing irreparably. Turning it into just so much rubble. The glare on the window nearly prevents my picking out the indigenous flora at this distance, and my eyes are left bloodshot and itchy with the attempt, painful

distracting reminders for two or three weeks at a time that I am growing old and that if I don't lose my sight entirely, it will diminish with each passing month until barely a pinprick of light will remain, and then how will I entertain myself come morning? How will I hunt up the yellowing weeds and deformed clover from where I'm sitting in my chair or follow the vapor trails crisscrossing like childish scribbles overhead? The anxiety lasts until the physical symptoms disappear and then it is as if I have been dropped fully formed from the heavens once again, as vigorous as a larval toad! We borrow the skin that holds us in from those who came before us, replicating it through means I barely understand and possess none of the vocabulary to communicate accurately, but the fact remains, the perimeter, the boundary, is not ours alone – this is why you find such shocking resemblance to unknown aunts and uncles, or long deceased grandparents when you stumble on an old photograph and your breath, which does belong to you and you alone despite the fact of its having been recently in the lungs of others, even complete strangers and the animals of the nearby forest, escapes audibly, seems reluctant for a moment to return. It is therefore the center that matters, that gives the individual his identity, no matter if that center is little more than blood and bile and a



few insignificant bones. Any attempt to look elsewhere, to mine the detritus of the past, for instance -- one's ephemeral dreams and pointless memories, one's hiccoughs from long ago -- leads to a reckless multiplication, a mirror-show that self-destructs under its own preposterous weight and the sheer numbers involved. They bound across the surface like spilled ball bearings and you can no more hunt them all down and smash them back together into a coherent whole than you can read every entry in the encyclopedia at once or separate out each individual molecule of water as the water rolls off your suddenly unfamiliar hands. In fact, if we wish to follow this as far as it goes, your hands look, when you are forced to gaze at them for long minutes at a time (prompted, say, by boredom or the worry that something untoward is happening inside them, the pooling of blood or the slow disintegration of the tendons) as if they belong to somebody else, as if they have been grafted onto the ends of your arms by accident and you must do everything in your power to keep this a secret lest someone else notice and demand -- because justice calls for it, because without justice we would be no more than baboons scattered about on our filthy rocks -- their immediate and permanent and no doubt very painful return.

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Occasionally, a speech sounds as if it has been negatively impacted by the chemicals ingested beforehand, as if it has been rendered incoherent and is thus subject to the same set of natural laws as the rest of us. But we know this isn't the case as we have studied the phenomenon of speech for centuries, if by studying you mean discussing it among our friends and writing down our opinions long after they have solidified, after they have turned into something like granite. I dislike the rumble and reverberations of the earthmovers outside but there is nothing I can do about it beyond increasing the volume of the stereo and pretending that in a month or two all of it will be finished – the overpass and the lone skyscraper with an obscure Norwegian businessman's name on it, the related staggering into and then out of pool halls in groups of ten or more, a song on the lips that originated perhaps in the First World War when ordinary people wrote songs at a staggering clip. Even those who held out little hope of ever hearing their work performed by the travelling minstrel shows or on the local church organ. Our instincts take us into a room where the past has been laid out neatly in the form of these melodies hard to pinpoint (but still strangely haunting for all that) or old telegrams and black and white photos where

occasionally we recognize our names, though they might be spelled incorrectly, or our faces if we squint a little and whip out the magnifying glasses we have brought along on a hunch or a dare. And then there they are, like bits of smoke emanating from the branches of a hickory tree or the faint visages of ghosts hovering in a window three stories up.

Afterward, we experience something like a hangover, because everyone knows (or at least suspects, the way they suspect pain is a universal language without the equivalent of adverbs) nostalgia is very bad for both the heart and the kidneys, and it just keeps resurfacing like some sort of primeval lungfish that can't get comfortable in its natural environment and so insists on invading our own. Best to just ignore it, if possible, to turn your attention to the repeated banging on the front door, for example. There, at least, you might discover something novel, something that will allow you to distance yourself finally from what you used to be but are no longer, that will allow you to recognize that only the slick glassy surface of the present is capable of catching any lasting reflection at all (lasting here meaning, I suppose, duration beyond the count of three, if done quickly, and if you are prepared ahead of time to fail). Maybe you'll find there a neighbor accomplished at bending spoons with little more than the power of his mind and the extraordinary

strength of his fingers. Or a complete stranger whose car is stuck in the mud, and he wishes simply to use your telephone because the battery in his phone is dead and his feet are already beginning to blister. His version of events is no more preposterous than any other, and it has the further benefit of reminding one that there are substances beyond the walls that will not bend to our intentions no matter how vigorously we repeat those intentions, substances that seem as if they have been dropped in place, have been scattered about haphazardly here and there, in a deliberate attempt to transform the previously daunting and powerful human will into a shadowy satire of itself, into a child who shrieks unmercifully whenever its shoes come untied.

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Debris fields capture our attention for a day or two and then they are replaced by other debris fields farther away, with bits of doghouse in them (the lumber, at any rate, mostly painted red) and Styrofoam and the utensils one uses to handle particularly difficult or odd-shaped food items like ears of corn or entire sides of beef. The contrary emotion is similar to joy, but it has no real name yet as so few people have experienced it. They number in the thousands maybe and are spread about so thinly on the surface of the Earth,

you'd think they had been cast up there accidentally, like certain rarely discovered seashells (or, for that matter, the aforementioned debris fields) carried on the currents that just won't stop flowing in this direction. You may plunge deep into the pages of regional history and find even fewer still -- the man who carved canoes for a living out of the trunks of trees that didn't happen to stand on his own property. The man who quit his job with the city's water department to focus all his attention on composing epic poems in a language he had scant understanding of. I like to think our foibles are like collections of small colored stones such as children put together for reasons only they can fathom, collections worth next to nothing on the larger market and yet charged through with enchantment and mystery of a type those who gather them together will never again know in their lifetimes. They will grow old and sick without ever recapturing either the intensity of the initial sensations or the equivalent in further pursuits, and we may imagine those last days as somewhat bitter like the chicory coffee my aunt used to drink because she could not afford the regular kind. Does this mean only our most significant pursuits warrant real attention, that our failures ought to be erased as a matter of course because they are embarrassing, because they are like patches of skin which

swell and die and give off an unpleasant odor? There are people even now scaling mountains that look as if they have been conjured from the pages of the most urbane fairy tales you can imagine, with pipe-smoking protagonists explaining Freudian psycho-dynamics to creatures that may once have been related to dragons, but which now seem, as a result, I suppose, of selective breeding programs going back a hundred years or more, like little more than upright salamanders with their hands in their pockets. There are entire days when I forget the human race exists at all, and on those days, when the air conditioning is roaring out of the vents at my feet and, as a result, the ordinarily neglected areas of skin between my toes demand my attention so insistently, I think for a moment they might rupture and produce a confetti of some kind, or even miniature balloons (such is my state of mind caused by the intolerable itching), all of it emerging from the inside, from the region of the nearby metatarsals, I know somewhere in the back of that same mind that I am letting my life waste away like dirty water in a backed up sink (though for consistency's sake we ought to include in the image a working drain – otherwise nothing is going to waste; everything is saved, and we have instead a suggestion of frugality, of making the best out of whatever little we have

been given), and the only way I can reverse this terrifying process is to overcome my irrational fear of acquiring any number of other irrational fears once I step out into the open. I must go outside and walk down the sidewalk and maybe even tip my hat to a stranger. He will certainly, then, be obliged to respond in some manner, if only because the gesture is so out of place, so ridiculously archaic.

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The decision comes more easily than the previous three, due to the wanton impossibility of its ever leading to the nearby hills where the edible roots bake in the hot sun and the aroma reminds you of the corner bistro that was never quite cleaned out properly in the corners. That had a clientele very like that you see in the black and white movies with men in sombreros and the women dancing with their hands on their knees. Alternating. Opening their eyes so wide at intervals, you begin to wonder if perhaps something extraordinary is happening offscreen – artillery explosions, the scattering to the shelter of buildings once designed to house enormous quantities of ice. I nod off momentarily and in the haze that exists there between the waking state and the one least like it, I see the key to the code laid out as clearly as if it had been written down by

hand using indigo ink and parchment. With its assistance, I will be able to determine once and for all what it is Immanuel is trying to say behind his window across the way, I will be able to answer him in bursts of prose so ornate as to reassure him of my identity and then infuriate him immediately because of the lack of anything approximating what he used to call meaningful and proper style – the refusal to constantly split one’s infinitives, the insistence on communicating with the barest essentials, even throwing the sentence away as a logical unit and replacing it with the coded equivalent of squeals and grunts, with animalistic intonations copied slavishly from the hogs that root about in the abandoned gardens close by and the ravens hopping about on two feet in the branches of the trees and on the street, except for those rare individuals who have managed to escape somehow from a snare. Upon waking, of course, all of it is gone, vanished into thin air like the sound of a trombone played three blocks away, and I am left with little more than the patchwork guessing I have relied on since the phenomenon first began, since a cold front moved through and brought with it lightning so ferocious as to turn the previously green edges of the oak leaves a startled umber and to make the teeth in the back of your mouth ache at the elemental root, at the place where they are not teeth



anymore at all but the inarticulate idea of such, the mute potential and framework.

Not satisfied with the progress to date, I amble over to the lowered shade and glance quickly between the slats, trying not to let any light escape in the process, which, of course, is impossible. It is like forging flesh with a needle or landing safely on both feet after jumping from the roof of a three-story house in the historic district of town on little more than a dare. At this time of night I can see next to nothing, not the outline of his window, nor the handpump for the well on that side of the property; I can't even be sure, in fact, that I am facing in the correct direction without relying on the fallible testimony of the memory, which is, in this instance, like a jailhouse informant wishing to secure himself a deal, and, as a consequence, a moment of vertigo – so powerful as to surpass all previous moments of vertigo – which number maybe six in all and reach back to the time of infancy like tentacles boiling up from the deep and exploding through the surface in all directions violently – overcomes me and forces me to sit down beneath the window where there is no chair, not even so much as a footstool to support my suddenly considerable weight, only the floor with its carpet of an interminable hue and the dusty notebooks stacked up around it, threatening at any

moment to topple over and submerge me in a flood of my own long-forgotten words, youthful paeans to sexual jealousy, the villanelles and sestinas composed in a desperate attempt to see an otherwise mindless and interminable afternoon through.

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Such progress as exists in this corner of the world, with its upside-down water towers and its cabbage rows two and three meters thick, begins to look like a child hopping backwards in a mostly straight line until it seems as if that child will fall off a cliff. But then you realize the cliff is itself an illusion with a long pedigree, originating perhaps in the films they made up the road decades ago starring out-of-work waiters and taxi drivers who were still handsome and could deliver their lines with aplomb, but something was still missing. Something just didn't add up. Today, the corners of our eyes are vulnerable, are deformed slightly and begin to hurt just as soon as the sun comes up and its rays bounce off the glass in the windows, the moisture on the barley. I am all for the operation recommended to fix this deformity because it costs a fraction of that required to pack up and move away, to build new fences and stand around in groups of five and six reminiscing about the times

when we didn't have to build anything. It had already all been done for us. Of course, you can make the objection that this just leads to a sense of worthlessness, of not knowing in which direction to turn. Or if there are any directions anymore. Maybe they have all been replaced by empty space and we just have to become acclimated, just have to give ourselves enough time to thrive in it, or at least stop whimpering. I remember jumping from one tree branch to another without the least concern for the effects of gravity should one of them snap under my already considerable weight, and this freedom from anxiety, from the constraints of the everyday, was something so precious I wouldn't trade it now for a handful of emeralds or a night of passion with a woman twice my height. And maybe that's the advantage of not knowing precisely how stories work when you set out to tell them, or at least type them up after someone else has written them down longhand, has composed them using methods so ancient they wouldn't seem out of place in the stone castles of Crete or the halls of Syracuse University. You have the advantage of discovering some overarching concept that tamps the melodrama down, even snuffs it out by virtue of its being so cerebral. But then there is the distinct disadvantage that no one will take it seriously anymore because it has wormed

its way in through the ear canal and is lodged rather precariously against the structures found deep inside like a mermaid singing on its rock. But instead of singing, of course, it is making a sermon with non-Euclidean geometry as its language and foundation rather than the Gospel of St. Mark. It is throwing its weight forward and trusting the universe to support it even though that very same universe has been in the habit of disintegrating with each passing second, of abandoning everything that has occurred within it to the confines of oblivion simply because it can, because it seems to be amused and enthralled and hopelessly enchanted all at the same time by the alluring concept of nothing.

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A uniformly smooth or even surface is to be preferred and usually can be acquired by shaping and reshaping using a tool designed specifically for that purpose and altered very little over the centuries – an adze, say, or a shovel with rounded edges. Bare hands work as well but are slow and have a tendency to become deformed over the course of the procedure. The pain is like that you'd feel should you be bitten by eels in shallow water, sufficient to send you over the hilltop toward the center of an island that is continually

expanding due to active lava flows and so does not have, in the strictest sense, an exact geometrical center, or at least not one that lasts for more than four or five hours at a time. Our blandishments begin to stick in the throat as if they were fishbones and as a result we wander over the countryside looking in ever more desperate and expanding circles for the one forgotten root cellar in which documents have likely been stored, essential documents concerning the creation of the Earth by powers one can't imagine unless one is in the habit of using one's imagination because memory has yet to get its scrawny fingers around the throat of the everyday, has yet to strangle the life out of the present moment because it is jealous and a little bit sadistic. If no documents turn up, that isn't, in itself, a tragedy. We can always create some for ourselves, write them up and distribute them to those who are still loitering beside the hotels and miniature golf courses on the road leading out of town, those who play dice in the shadows because the sunlight alters the outcome inevitably for the worst. It makes what you see incontrovertible and therefore of little use to the prattling human mind and its need to extend itself outside its own boundaries, to exceed the limits imposed upon it by the accident of flesh and bone. Never mind that they are forgeries, that no one has bothered to

notarize or annotate, to provide gloss and commentary at two cents a word, or a herd of goats, for the completion of the whole. The results are just as pristine, just as doctrinaire and appropriate as anything you'd find chiseled into a bit of basalt at the side of the great salt oceans that pockmark the surface of the world as if it were the face of a man who has suffered terrible ailments and deformity in the distant past but who is now cured, even almost serene and satisfied somehow, like a learned monk or a holy fool.

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Despite what might be claimed by those who don't know, who receive their information from the telex radio because no one bothered to turn it off, the most recent and expensive modification means her nostrils no longer strike me as one of the wonders of the natural world; in fact, they seem to angle away from the center of her face at too steep a degree and threaten to cast the whole visage precipitously into the realm of absurdity, of overt dinner theatre. Maybe your expectations, she says as she mops at her brow with a cast-off tube sock, have been formulated with the barrier reef in mind, have been borrowed from the coast the way we borrow euphemisms or shellfish, their gustatory vigor! Eulalie stands at the bookshelf with her

back turned to me and the supple angles of her body in the half-light suggest not so much a human figure from antiquity as the past itself grudgingly forced into human form. It presses and strains against its container in an impatient attempt to assert itself again as might a reptile used to having its way among the ferns or a body of water trapped and narrowed suddenly inside a gorge. I can't think of a single previous occasion when she has appeared more primeval or appealing unless it is that evening, twenty years ago and more, when the flesh on her forearms had been rubbed raw by the actions of a length of rope, perhaps, or some other object she refused to divulge the true nature of, or, for that matter, who might have had cause to make such delicate use of it in the hours leading up to her appearance. I admit to focusing on these moments of jealous irrational obsession, of morbid invention to occupy my otherwise pointlessly tormented mind, to the exclusion of almost all the others, as if the true nature of her genius, her soul, is to be found in them the way we find our own names hidden inside the lettering of the window advertisements for ice cream or cigarettes, inside the vocal protestations of people gathered in large numbers on the street to decry shabby treatment by city leaders or rampant corruption (financial or otherwise) among the clergy. Eventually, she finds her

way to the arm of the chair where I am sitting and drapes herself languidly over one side of my body (that side which has long since ceased accepting the pointed sensations of the larger world with anything like the alacrity of the other side for reasons I have yet to entirely decipher; perhaps it has to do with the devastating accident on stilts I don't remember having but which I have been assured over and over again by both strangers and acquaintances actually occurred, or a virus I picked up as a child when I was in the habit of picking up as many of them, consciously or unconsciously, as I could) and she runs her fingers through my hair, or what remains of it, as if she expects to find there some idea of the structure, of the chemical make-up, the elements and the elemental oils, of the body that sits motionless as a tree stump underneath it, the body from which the hair sprouts and which for the moment anyway halts her further sideways descent to the floor as demanded by the unseen forces of gravity and everyday common sense. Soon, her breath finds its terminus in my own nostrils, so far free of tinkering and appreciative deep inside themselves, at the root, at the ganglia that protrude and wave unprotected in the far recesses of their joint cave, for the scent of cumin and lavender, the slow eruption of peppermint and just the faintest hint of raw, even



decomposing meat that brings the experience to its much-needed climax and close like a cluster of gaudy fireworks or an involuntary shudder in the loins.

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Her obsession with sailing leads her to the far corners of an empire that used to occupy so much of the map you'd think a shadow had fallen across it, that someone had come into the room behind you and was staring over your shoulder, anxious to see you jump. The fencerows, she reports, before you even reached the sea, stretched out for weeks and the horizon had a tendency to alter its height almost imperceptibly until you couldn't be sure anymore you were standing on two feet. She knows the terminology, knows the way the wind bites like a praying mantis and when I quiz her on the particulars anyway she at first grows animated and excited and the color returns to the tops of her ears exposed by her hair there which can't quite seem to exert its own authority for more than a minute or two, the time it would take to jot all of this down and illustrate it perhaps in a notebook that I keep in a drawer for whenever she decides to visit. Only trouble is it is located in the desk across the way and if I stand up to retrieve it, she will know immediately that it is her outer appendages I am most

concerned with capturing and she will become offended. It has happened before. I often wonder if we are not better suited to throwing our impressions away the moment they are formed, tossing them out like heads of rotten cabbage instead of clinging to them so desperately the act itself causes them to change, transforms them, mutilates them, as it were, beneath the frantic pressure of our fingers. Eulalie deems such speculation fruitless, scoffs with every millimeter of her being, until there is a shaking like that one would normally associate with restrained mirth, with a chuckling under the breath, only it increases in intensity and virulence until you realize something neurological is taking place, some distant cousin to epilepsy, I suppose, a remnant from our early mammalian, shrew-like past, when the wiring was taxed with connecting itself and mucked things up in its rush. The fit is complete with a dry snapping of the jaws and a howl produced so deep in the chest it has no hope of ever escaping into the clear light of day again but must stay forever embedded just beneath the sternum where it starts to ache, I'm sure, with the mounting pressure, with the hydraulic realities of the situation, and it sets Eulalie to scratching mercilessly at the skin that covers it until bits and pieces get stuck under her nails and a thin trickle of blood runs down the front of her shirt and gathers

at her waistband like a wedding party obeying the photographer at the duck pond. These episodes occur so rarely, I haven't become acclimated yet, and I nearly lose my mind with worry. I lead her to the bench by the window where she can begin to calm herself by watching the moon make its relentless, bonehead journey from one side of the sky to the other and I can look for something – a towel tossed aside carelessly, a bit of manuscript no longer even fit to be considered for the appendix – and all the while whistle, so as to soothe her, to make her forget perhaps for a moment where she is and what has happened, fragments of Schumann's *Lieder*, the same as my grandmother used to hum in my company when she was peeling potatoes for our dinner.

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The regimen includes dried insects, usually crickets harvested close to home and spiced so as to hide the original overpowering flavor, and a list of four or five leading Shakespearean scholars who suggest revision from the Quarto versions to the Folio and then throw up their hands in disgust when they are taken to task by those who believe time is not linear but a construct resembling an oval damaged on one side by hammer blows. They generate

contrary evidence out of thin air as if it were a paragraph of previously unassociated phrases and epigraphs. I partake of this exotic protein only so as to ensure the day doesn't become just like all the others destined to follow it, namely an exercise in sitting still so as to avoid detection by whatever enemies may be lurking unseen in the rhododendrons. Not that I haven't cased the place myself, walked its every inch and hillock at least a dozen times since the beginning of May, but that just means whatever it is I missed is now growing larger and expanding like a shadow cast by the sun when it is closer than it would be otherwise, due to the predictable tilt of the Earth, I suppose, and the mechanism which causes it. We are invited to imagine here something industrial, with enormous gears and pulleys, and when we succeed in placing this in our minds, right at the center, we find we are no longer vulnerable to certain mood disorders that have, until that time, passed from one generation to the next as consistently as, say, premature balding or crooked incisors. Not that the reverse isn't also true, isn't also liable to rear its countenance now that the path has been cleared for it, the permission granted. Eulalie scratches at the paint on the window, pulls away sheets as long and broad as her fingers and brings them to her lips as if to suggest nothing is off limits. But I know this is for show,

just as are the markings on her arms in geometrical patterns, scar tissue now arranged in shapes designed to make me think of those earliest civilizations where human sacrifice was, if not, *de rigueur*, at least a significant part of the social fabric and guaranteed to induce commentary by late comers and detractors who know they are contributing to someone else's immortality but who don't seem capable of helping themselves. They don't even seem to know when their own shoes have come untied. She likes to stretch her arms high above her head as if to undo the effects of fatigue or rheumatism, and when the scar tissue is thus further revealed, she winks. She says the time has come for the two of us to recognize the actual power differential and do something about it. A terrible weight materializes in my abdomen and though I know this is a perfectly appropriate response to fear, I can't help but imagine for a moment that she has placed through her own peculiar brand of wizardry an actual object inside my body – most likely a red brick or a bit of anchor like those you see sometimes adorning the front – the prow? – of ships that are making their slow and deliberate way from here to Scandinavia.

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What is it if not a scratching at the face of eternity, a blatant attempt to disregard anonymity by drawing maps or screeching at the top of one's lungs? If your diet remains plant-based even as the sun wilts the vegetation, who is going to second guess your adjustments, your decision to walk the path backward until you wind up at the very spot you had conjured in your mind the night before just as you were sliding into the realms of dream and make-believe, the realms of the people who are not really people at all but stand-ins. Replicas. They possess skin very like our own, full of pores and crawling with microbes, but the tint is not what it should be and when you touch it, there is no electricity relayed and translated to your fingertips. It is like touching a piece of cardboard assuming it has not stayed out in the elements too long and become soggy. If I had my way, we'd forget about the future just as thoroughly as we do the past and concentrate not so much on the present, which is a concept without content, a meteor shower forever flaming out in oranges and whites, but on the words we waste each time we open our mouths and we can't think of anything to say. We stand there gawking and swallowing air and the people around us begin to pull faces, to back away slowly as if they have just realized they are in the company of something virulent and contagious. And what if we then

manage to croak out a syllable or two, to reach down deep inside and pull out half a sentence as if it were a bloody string of gut? The damage would be permanent and we'd find ourselves, I suppose, riding as a form of therapy the train to the small barrier islands at the periphery of the city where the sea birds continue to nest despite the crowds who have come there to witness a miracle but leave disappointed. It's exactly the same thing I can see at home, they mutter disapprovingly on their way out, the same thing that occupies my time from morning until night, when I can then occupy it with delusions and perversions of my own forging, transgressions so necessary as to seem at the moment I am making them like oxygen or one of those other elements that ride about invisible on the substance we take into our lungs. Perhaps this is why the patterns remind me of utter chaos, of a place where patterns do not come into being or where they erase themselves immediately, as a matter of course, and though I know the two are mutually exclusive, I insist on interpreting them in this fashion, which means not to interpret them at all. Not to decipher what they mean, whether on paper or on skin, and just to stare at them instead as if staring at the back of my eyelids or the sky when it is chock-full of stars and we haven't yet learned that they too can be grouped together

for predictive or narrative purposes, can be molded into something like a lie simply because we can't stand the idea of sitting still for more than a minute or two, of allowing ourselves to be bored and without diversion much as the snails plod their way hopelessly to the top of whatever grass blade they happen to be occupying and once there, turn around and go back down again almost immediately because they know somehow they are in danger of predation or maybe because the sunlight is of such intensity it might dry them up entirely inside their small and mostly colorless shells.

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Ignore the rage and you will inevitably get stalled in it, trapped as it were by the corneas of your own eyes. The lesson is handed down to each generation until it no longer seems valid, until it no longer even has a title. We refer to it by means of hand gestures or epic similes with the ocean in them and the birds that migrate from one end of the ocean to another looking for shelter, I suppose, or weather that doesn't freeze them to a single spot on the map. Later, the lights begin to flicker and our dreams are inundated with strangers who seem receptive to playing key parts in those episodes from our own pasts that insist on cropping



up whenever we are unconscious. But just at the crucial moment – when the heavens open up and throw thunderbolts down at us from on high, when the radio is suddenly full of familiar harmonies that remind us of the sidewalks and storefronts of the metropolis two towns over from our own – they balk. They demand a chair with their names scrawled conspicuously across the back, the right to oversee our next move and the one after that until we realize we have lost all control of our own destiny. We are mere automatons at the mercy of other automatons with much slicker hair than ours and callouses on their feet from all the long-distance running they do, the desire to get from one place to another quickly being nearly universal. Still, my head aches so severely, I decide to cut the session short and venture out to the spillway where a half dozen people or so are pulling bluegill up from the river at the bottom with nets. Etiquette requires I salute them in some fashion, by raising my hat or calling out in a cheerful voice, but etiquette be damned! I make for the shadows of the trees along one bank and huddle there exhausted and frightened and certain that I will be dragged out by my ankles and beaten severely with sticks or boat paddles. How I come to this conclusion has something to do, I'm sure, with the sight of those pitiful fish dumped out in groups upon the ground

and wriggling about hopelessly. I suppose they intend to make their escape that way, to bumble accidentally back into the safety of the cold and murky water, but what's the point? They'll just end up getting scooped out again by those awful people with nets, or assuming night falls and everyone has gone home, something else will inevitably eat them – a bigger fish or a turtle. Something else is always lying in wait. Perhaps this, then, is the lesson to be handed down to later generations rather than the nameless one mentioned earlier. And, though it seems so obvious as to preclude mention, we find a certain joy in repeating things like this until they become all but meaningless. They turn to gibberish the way wine turns sometimes into vinegar and sometimes (with a little assistance from those who know what they are doing) into brandy. You have merely to wish it in one direction or another and then, of course, get your hands dirty to decide which it is going to be. For my part, I'd rather not know what is coming; I'd rather not be consulted in any way unless it involves speaking in tongues and maybe handling rattle snakes just to show how pure you have become. That way, at least, I'd understand what was happening. I could make my contribution, could stand around afterward smoking a cigar and listening to the neighborhood children curse and scream.

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Picture a raft made of oil drums and palm fronds, its cargo two men so skinny as to seem like mere accidents of bone, and several different species of fowl tethered together to keep them from taking flight. The journey, if it can be called that, if the term applies to staying mostly stationary in a watery realm without borders, without limit, occupies our every discussion for the better part of two weeks and then we all but forget about it, we relegate it to the basement of the mind like tea cups. You might assume negligence on our parts, a distinct lack of empathy for the fate of other human beings, but that would be a mistake simply because the phenomenon in question hasn't been identified previously. It hasn't even been labeled except by those who affix labels to absolutely everything as a matter of course. They don't seem capable of stepping off the front stoop in the morning without engaging in this behavior that most of the rest of us find, if not abhorrent, at least mildly distracting, much the way we might be distracted by the angry buzzing of hornets about the ear or the clatter and thud of heavy machinery in the process of digging foundations or clearing away bits of the surrounding forest so as to make way for yet another new road. There is a chance, certainly, slight though it may be, that Immanuel isn't really over there, that

he has long since fled the state and the nation and is even now preparing to jump from some non-descript airplane and parachute his way to safety or is speaking Cantonese to officials who pretend to understand, who nod and smile and occasionally offer some advice that wasn't needed or requested but which came out, as it were, involuntarily, in reaction to the faulty use of idiom, to the clear naiveté of the speaker. I detest being in this situation, though, of having to determine for myself what is happening (in a metaphysical sense, of course, as opposed to a mathematical one or one that involves walking from one end of a taught rope to another in a very stiff breeze) when it is not only out of my control but out of my line of sight as well. It's like listening to something on the radio and feeling as if you have heard it before but you don't know the title of the piece or even its category – mazurka or waltz, quartet or regression. I think maybe Immanuel has stopped trying to communicate with me directly through the movement of the shades on the window of the house across the way, instead choosing as intermediaries strangers like the woman who hesitated yesterday in the middle of the street, just as if she had been visited suddenly by demons, and the experience was such that the temperature of her flesh rose several degrees instantly and almost caused her to faint. I

hope you will forgive me when I assure you that it was all quite comical and I had to contain myself, had to will myself not to laugh out loud, but I wasn't very successful, and the woman, decked out all in red with a hat secured squarely to the top of her head by means of a thick black chinstrap, looked around haughtily after her supernatural visitation had ceased. You could almost see the fury in her eyes, a black substance like bitumen rising and falling, sloshing from one side to another and threatening to swamp the entire edifice under its terrifying weight, its insurmountable momentum.

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The first object, I suppose, is to secure the features, the portions and aspects of the face that make him appear distinct, someone other than all those who stand in his vicinity when they are standing or who plod off in the direction of the horizon when they are tired of standing in one place or when some other business calls them away. I can't imagine a more pointless exercise and so contribute to it grudgingly the way one might sit at the end of the table at a committee meeting and speak up once or twice merely to repeat, in different terms, what some other, more prominent or zealous member has already said. We can

begin with the nose at its place in the center. It is very like the axis of the Earth itself which is represented in various mythologies (most notably the Norse) as being a tree of some sort, no doubt both majestic and local in flavor, something whose branches the audience will have bounded about in during an exuberant childhood. For this reason, and the reason that no one will care or object otherwise, we'll present the nose as wider than normal at the base and tapering very little, with a grainy texture to put one in mind of tree bark and the insects that can sometimes be seen to live in it, to infest it or simply to pass over it in their journey from one place to another. That it be broken at some particular and significant moment in the past is standard fare, though we ought to think long and hard before adopting the convention if for no other reason than it will require a concise interlude and narrative to explain the origins of the deformity and perhaps hint obliquely at other hidden mannerisms and characteristics which were formed simultaneously with the break, and which will turn out on closer inspection to matter a great deal down the road, will affect the outcome of any otherwise incomprehensible events that may follow. The spinning of these adventures, while to be expected from start to finish given the definition of the endeavor on which we are now jointly embarked,

does not come naturally to either you or me, and so avoiding the first such instance to crop up here as more than mere potentiality by keeping the bridge of the nose straight and unblemished seems an attractive way out, but is also obviously a bit cowardly and, worse yet, dishonest, like someone announcing to all the world that he is a spelunker without his ever once having bothered to lower himself into a cave.

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The structures located underground by sensitive scientific equipment like sonar and its more contemporary brethren astonish and baffle us from the moment of their discovery to the moment of their unearthing and sometimes long after, so that we are still discussing them over crullers come Thanksgiving morning when the sun and its peculiar autumnal angle have put us in mind of the last years of our own lives and which monuments we will have erected, however accidentally. Perhaps they speak a language not yet recognized by those who were intended to be the audience because they paid attention to us now and then when we passed them in the street on our way to withdraw money from the bank or when we were caressing their shoulders to work out the tension that had settled there like

mercury or some other heavy metal. The admission brings with it any number of complications that are best passed over discreetly in conversation with those who have not yet been let in on the secret, who still see the statues erected at the edge of town as simply a collection of inanimate objects with no more relevance to their everyday lives than, say, the signing of the Magna Carta or the dropping of stones into a well said to be without bottom. You can stand at the edge all day and listen for an impact without ever hearing anything, though after a while, the structures of the ear being what they are – namely, fallible flesh and blood inclined to imprecision – you might think you hear something after all, something faint and far away but possessing for all that the distinct aural qualities one would associate with an object making contact with another object and disintegrating, or at least altering its fundamental structure in a permanent manner like an egg after the process of allowing whatever was incubating inside to enter the world, to escape its containment and begin exploring the surroundings – the marshlands dense with tree roots and mosquitoes, the high plains buried periodically under three feet of snow. All signs indicate a rabbit fever, passed around communally without our realizing the peril until much too late. Aftereffects keep



cropping up, like messages from outer space, and we throw our bodies into the recommended exercise regimens and dietary restrictions as if our bodies did not entirely belong to us, as if we had leased them for a few months and then just forgot to return them to their original owners. As a consequence, the light at the end of the hallway becomes something to dread, to avoid like secondhand cigarette smoke or a reputation for cheating at whist. We tiptoe slowly around the edges of it as best we can until we find ourselves on the other side and wishing we were back where we started. I suspect this is a common theme among those who remain upright, those who have not let the weight of the atmosphere pressing down continuously upon their shoulders to wreak havoc on their equilibrium. They even strut now and then like roosters do just before their heads get lopped off. The rest of us are hard-pressed to remember a day when we were happy, the way you imagine condors being happy when they are riding a thermal draft half a mile above a canyon floor, and the whole wide world is spread out beneath them, beckoning, calling their names -- if condors have names -- or just gesturing with the equivalent of an index finger.

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Maybe we're here to expound without the use of too many words, to gesture, mostly, and jump from one tree stump to another without touching the ground, just as we used to do when we were children and we thought the whole of our futures rested on the successful completion of some arbitrary task. The dishes pile up like shipping containers at the wharf and the stink is such that it runs one out of the room for a good ten minutes or so until the consolations of philosophy plug up the nose sufficiently to allow one back inside to complete the task that rightly belongs to others. Those who stand around with their hands in their pockets waiting for someone to drive up and whistle, someone to flash a gold nugget struck straight from the earth. Then the floodgates open and we barely have time to secure ourselves in our seats with a length of rope and the Bible in our hands, open, I suppose, to anything in Ecclesiastes. Especially that part where a solemn tone is struck for once, where disingenuousness goes the way of the prong-horned antelope and, as a result, the skies overhead turn a brilliant white with the influx of ice, so high up it doesn't really count as part of the planet anymore but can't quite make its escape either, can't quite find its way into the emptiness of space because there it would be something other than emptiness and so is not allowed by the rules, written or

simply stated out loud. It makes me long for a time when I too was part of something larger than myself but refused to acknowledge this fact simply because doing so would shrink the dimensions of that something considerably. It would make it seem as if I were somehow in control. A prospect that frightened me at the time much the way we are frightened by our own image in the mirror when we see it only partially illuminated and realize that, someday, we are going to grow old.

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After too much time spent determining what a proposition is and what it does and how it relates to the rest of the world where propositions are not welcomed, are not even given the dignity of being actual entities, we return to that place where our own failures and shortcomings are illustrated for all to see on the wall in a mural that has no title but which is familiar enough for all that – with its eagles plunging precipitously from the sky like lightning bolts and the letters of the alphabet all turned around backward until we can't tell anymore if something is being communicated to us, or hidden away forever. We can't determine why our eyes are drawn consistently to one side as if something visible has turned audible over there, and the disorientation

this causes is similar to that one might expect from the sudden onset of dementia or too many nights spent wandering alone in the cold. Just east of Yellowknife.

Of course, someone is waiting at the other end, and when you raise your hand in a gesture meant to signal recognition, she flees. She hurries down the stairs and into the darkness of whatever structure awaits there -- a tunnel or cave or trendy boutique -- and you know you should follow, but paralysis sets in, and it is touch and go for a while whether you are even going to be able to continue breathing, to continue taking in oxygen and nitrogen and expelling carbon dioxide with the regularity established from your very earliest days on the planet.

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The enormous ideas rattle around like loose change in the pocket, and our response to them is equally submissive, as if we have to be somewhere and there are only about twenty minutes left. We shuffle and guffaw and act, all in all, as if this is the first time we have come into contact with people more intelligent than ourselves, though, truth be told, it is an almost daily occurrence and has been since we were two or three years old. My elbow twists the wrong way suddenly and the pain is like the smallest tangible

remnants of meteorites after they have tumbled from the heavens and have somehow found their way into the skin where they meet very little resistance. I think perhaps I have been working up to this moment slowly, inevitably, thinking about it without ever really acknowledging the contents of the thought process itself, until here it is, and I am forced to contend not only with the physical sensations, which are intense enough to make one swear off all sensation forever and embrace wholeheartedly a spirit world one has not, to that point, much believed in, but also the acts of will required to bring about this result – the purposeful movements of the body and the hands; the near constant verbal inquiries -- as well as the accidents of the subconscious mind, the worrying away at boundaries and the conjuring of devils better left to their premises in the wet dark. An obvious and useful antidote lies in the leaves of the hawthorn tree twisting about on itself in the corner of the property, and when I make my way there grudgingly, sick to the very core of my being with the constant nerve-firing and the sudden loss of ennui, the first unmistakable rays of something like hope fall on me for the first time in maybe six or seven days. At least since the time the mail arrived and with it, a notice that I am the lucky winner! That a brand-new object of some sort is waiting in my name at

the warehouse and I have merely to figure out how to transport it from one place to another to call it my own. Meanwhile, somewhere else, a cold and bracing wind comes down off the mountain and engulfs everything in its path, swallows up the least creature -- a vole or a butterfly -- and carries it along with all the others in a great big jumbled heap like someone speaking who doesn't know how to stop, who can't recognize the clues in other people's faces, the constant turning away, the baring of the teeth behind the lips, as if to say I am getting ready to bite you. I haven't had anything to eat all day! Of course, this is followed almost immediately by an apology, an actual audible apology of the sort one expects when two lovers have been arguing about the shadowy presence of a third, someone guaranteed to complicate matters, but not, after careful consideration, enough for either of the originals to imperil what they already have through continued bitterness and strife. They choose instead to say they are sorry and then spend the rest of the day together at the nearby waterfall or the historic brewery district, taking tours and smiling and watching each other so closely out of the corner of their eyes anyone else present might be forgiven for believing they are perhaps mortal enemies

sworn to mutual destruction, with knives even hidden away for that purpose in their waistbands.

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I have the dream again in which I remove my eyelids with a putty knife, and when I try to explain it to Eulalie, to make it make sense the way algebra makes sense when you first start to study it, she puckers her lips in a gesture meant to simulate disgust, but which I know from long experience actually means she is getting a little turned on. Her flesh around the ears becomes nearly crimson and you can feel the heat from a step or two away, which is as close as she is going to let me get, apparently, her eyes already wide and feral, her symptoms calling for a shot of brandy at the very least, which I produce along with Sibelius on the turntable, an addition she finds pretentious and which hurries her out of the room. Our miseries pale in comparison to the everyday moments in which we feel nothing much at all, when the past flames out like a satellite in improper orbit, and we are left with the ticking of the clock and the dog barking next door because it too feels an overwhelming need to comment. The poison is in the pantry, right next to the dehydrated pancake batter and yes, there is the constant fear of confusion, of turning an otherwise placid

morning inside out like an old tube sock, but we have to take the expected with the impossible – the sudden appearance, say, of people dressed up like skeletons, hamming it up for a camera that has yet to materialize. I remember when Eulalie seemed to fall directly out of the sky like a meteorite that turns the whole planet orange, a flash so bright, momentarily, as to render it practically non-existent. In that moment I wondered if she were mythological in the sense of being more proposition than something rendered in flesh and blood, a thing to be conjured in academic dispute and then packed away again almost immediately before it can escape its borders and infect first the local atmosphere and then that which has no atmosphere but is merely empty space, or used to be. When she returns, Eulalie is holding a lizard in her hands, something tender and blue that she claims wandered across the carpet toward her in a more-or-less threatening fashion, a claim that bodes ill for its future but one which I am inclined to believe if only because doubt no longer seems a viable approach to anything. The ecologically sound intentions of those who hammer spikes into the trunks of the nearby cypress trees, the hand inside the puppet. I throw my hands up as a sign that she can do as she pleases but that I will be no part of it, I will be out on



the patio drinking coffee in a hopeless attempt to hold certain genetic ailments at bay, those I have no real reason to believe I have inherited but which I live in fear of just the same because they are like the books you read in childhood – fevered dreams with sack-faced killers and hummingbirds in them, and people swimming naked in a stream.

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In the hovel, images appear spontaneously and drive a wedge between the subject and the outside world, with its own overtaxed repertoire. Cacophony and wanton birds. Consonants manufactured so far back on the tongue they produce an effect not unlike that associated with bulldozers, heavy equipment. It doesn't last more than a moment or two, during which time we are invited to stumble past, draw from our own forgotten experiences like water from a particularly deep and polluted well, without of course committing to anything final. My instincts tell me that they have been utilized too frequently in this capacity and it is time to set all objects aside in favor of something less tangible, something less easily accessed by the fingers or the hand they are attached to. Even the yellow folders, empty but crying out like infants for attention, may be safely stowed away in the cardboard

boxes provided for just such a contingency. Or their equivalent in one's memory. That's the real issue, then, isn't it, those pictures, those snapshots that seem palsied with life at first and then diminish, wither and fall to the ground in heaps of moldering flesh. Imagine the stench that would naturally result if not for the safeguards put in place eons before when those charged with planning the whole affair, those charged with ensuring it didn't get out of hand the way the rest of creation had, with its murderous reptiles and its igneous stones, put their heads together and took careful notes and even developed a synthetic language to overcome the barrier that otherwise might have resulted given their diverse places of origin and their mostly somnolent natures! The frequency used keeps changing but the message carried over those waves remains remarkably consistent, having to do with why we were placed here against our will and what we are going to do about it. You'd think the lesser, local powers-that-be, whoever is on the receiving end of that transmission, would be seething from morning until just after morning when their other, more important, or at least more obvious, obligations kick in. But no, not a sound from that front, not so much as a clearing of the throat.

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After a reasonable amount of scrutiny, followed shortly thereafter by an unreasonable amount occasioned by the spotting of two or three airplanes in the distance like geometrical theorems circling about inside the head, we are treated to a great bellowing spectacle of a man dressed all in silk with patterns that seem to have their origins in the Levant if our online encyclopedias, quickly consulted, are to be trusted. They have whole sections devoted to the beginnings of the world, which beginnings vary greatly according to those who are telling the story, who have a vested interest, it seems, in making sure that it gets disseminated beyond ordinary borders. Past the confines of the desert with its barbed vegetation and its tendency to desiccate flesh. The man apparently has been imbibing the local liquor made from the stalks of indigenous plants with names that mean “the circle” and “beneath the pavement” in a dialect we have admittedly a very difficult time deciphering. This may have to do with the deformities on our tongues discovered once we were far enough away from home (say about a thousand kilometers), once we had no more access to medical care of the sort that might have reversed these unfortunate trends. His bare chest is covered with small bloody incisions that likely at one time combined to spell out a message of grave consequence to

anyone sitting close by the fire, but to examine it now with anything like the necessary detail would take a great deal of patience, not to mention nerve given the unpredictable arcs his arms are taking in concert with the vocalizations like a jungle ape's. I suggest a return to the riverbank to sort through our belongings and determine once and for all what has been misplaced and what has simply been stolen. The sky overhead turns a gray not unlike that of the eyes of the corpses one stumbles upon now and then floating in the eddies and calm spots where the cattails find sufficient anchor and the dragonflies are hurtling at breakneck speed at one another only to veer off magically at the last moment to avert what must be seen as a tragedy even at their diminished scale. It isn't long before the man collapses into a shadowy bundle of his own abundant flesh and pock-marked limbs and there emerges a murmur from the crowd like that you'd expect at the moment just before the curtain rises, just before a lone entertainer stands silhouetted and shadowed by columns of fire and flanked on both sides by understandably jittery lions, say, and statues of Zeus and Hera and the others in that tribe of all-too-human infamy and shenanigans, all of it carved most likely by machine from blocks of Styrofoam and weighing, in the aggregate, no more than your ordinary horse.

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A glance in a single arbitrary direction reveals the reflective retinas of someone sitting alone and muttering a string of words that sound suspiciously like prayer when we get close enough to distinguish actual human speech patterns from the background effluvia, like jet planes roaring past overhead or the squawk of peafowl disturbed in the underbrush. The night is cold as a spoon and deep, plastered all over with warnings of the sort that usually make their presence known through the swinging doors of the subconscious mind but which have suddenly decided to step out into the open and declare themselves ready for the spotlight, for the analysis that begins with the follicles of the hair on top of the head. We try our best to ignore them, to stumble forward with our hands in our pockets and our ears protected by what had once been the hirsute container of one outsized beast or another, the whispering mounting to a near shriek when the sunlight illuminates the horizon in a line like that you'd see around the lips of a clown or on old maps of the new world where Patagonia separates itself from the rest via its virtually endless mountain ranges and its weather made palpable and difficult through little more than a prompt, a goad to the imagination created with draughtsman's ink. I wake in a shelter so hastily prepared,

the corners turn out into the morning like secret freeways and you can smell the plantains and the rhododendrons clawing at the air. I recognize the woman with the lit retinas from the night before, her hands kept busy now with the torment of an average sized spider, her hair thrown out in all directions as if seeking the most advantageous route of escape, and I experience two moments of perfect clarity at exactly the same time, each one complimenting and pulling at the haunches of the other, trying to bring it to earth so as to keep it from blocking out the sun. Terror grips our hearts at precisely the moment when we realize we possess that organ in more than simple name only, when we realize the muscle fiber of which it is composed is prone to cramps and seizure like any other and may even perhaps be more vulnerable than its cousins in the arm, say, or diaphragm, because it has a finer pedigree, a longer list of stops along the way and accruals. Maybe then our only recourse is to continue as if it did not exist, as if it were something we invented for purely practical purposes, like a hammer, and we can just as easily walk away from it when we wish, when the days threaten to become so empty we have a hard time distinguishing them from a bunch of cardboard boxes, when our own names begin to sound like coarse insults and interjections hurled by a crowd gathered together to watch

a soccer tournament, say, or an elephant wandering around lost inside its circus.

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The changes in body chemistry increase to such a level we can only keep track of them using a color-coded system first devised in Verona centuries ago and left to mold in a drawer until its fortuitous discovery and dissemination from one part of the globe to another via both ancient sea routes and electronic transmission. You'll excuse me, though, if I refuse to celebrate, the sound it causes having the habit of entering into the skull through microscopic crevices and establishing itself as the dominant bit of information just the way a male hippopotamus will take over a stretch of river and tusk his rivals off to the side, or worse. That my hand is now missing is discernible with the naked eye, and I suspect, at first, some primitive surgery -- even voodoo -- practiced with the assistance of herbs and other organic hallucinogens gathered for this particular purpose and mixed in with the papaya juice served the previous morning, but none of this is verifiable any more than we can verify the shape and limit of the heavens themselves without the use of advanced astronomical equipment of the sort I don't think they manufacture anymore because it

became apparent doing so simply led to the emergence of further and ever more vexing questions, the answers to which were, at best, terrifying, and at worst liable to cause the dry earth beneath your feet to crack down the middle and suck you in. The others claim they hardly notice the difference and, besides, we all have our little problems, don't we? It's best not to dwell on them too audibly, or at length, lest people begin to think you are simply an inherently difficult person and so shy away at your approach. It's like when the chapter ends too abruptly and you can't tell if this is meant as the literary equivalent of a cliff hanger or a thumb in the eye. You can't even tell if it was done intentionally because intention no longer plays much of a role when it comes to the creation of something out of nothing, or at least so I have been told by those who spend their evenings strung out on mescaline and model airplane glue, who cut up bits of newspaper and pantyhose in order to shuffle them and re-arrange them and paste them onto lengths of cardboard the size and shape of a human torso, or occasionally a car door (challenges in material availability making the latter option rare as the sighting of a golden eagle outside its habitual range). When you try to correct them, to suggest that what they are in it for is something akin to self-aggrandizement and a taste of



glory deferred, but glory just the same, they look at you as if you are speaking Cantonese, and there follows a long moment of little interchange -- of almost total disconnection and isolation -- followed by a shrieking like that you'd expect should you happen to find yourself on the deck of a boat recently torpedoed and making its way slowly but inevitably beneath what turn out to be very icy waves.

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The angle is gentle, ridged, part of an animal of some sort like those that used to frequent swamps when the swamps were just beginning to differentiate themselves from the solid ground on either side and the ocean some miles further downstream. I measure it and jot down the data as best I can with the pencil in my teeth, but I realize almost immediately such data is useless given the fact that everything changes over time, adjusts itself to the circumstances or just gets bored because boredom has been built in from the beginning. As an antidote to the terror that might otherwise overwhelm every sentient being the way light overwhelms a darkened room, or perhaps vice versa.

Eulalie borrows five dollars and disappears for a week and a half, just goes missing as if she had never been anything more substantial than a rumor. At some point during that period, I walk the clock down a hill just crawling with serpents in hopes of finding someone capable of fixing the pendulum underneath which no longer swings even when you tap it with your finger. I suppose I am guilty of every offense she has accused me of over these years, offenses numbering I'd say in the dozens, and, somewhere, I have written many of them down in a binder with leather stamped and patterned on the outside, a gift probably from an aunt who no longer remembers my name, if she is even still walking the surface of the Earth, or maybe floating above it like a bank of cumulonimbus clouds. When Eulalie returns, she is holding the sculpture in both arms as if it is too heavy, or too precious, the way an infant is precious to those who had some hand in its creation. The thing that threw me off in the beginning was the teeth, generated from clay or steel, one couldn't tell which without approaching and rubbing a finger along the contours. I have dreams lately in which that form, that sculpture she no doubt ripped from its foundation in a public place, leers at me from the shadows and seems to try to speak. I lean in, of course, to get a better sense of what is being said, but I

lose my footing and find myself lying prostrate before it, as if in worship. Eulalie howls and cackles and snorts when I recall the position, tells me I am the cause of every corner, of every hard-to-see place in the world, and I suppose I should be flattered by this but am not. I know her penchant for hyperbole will someday cause a rift, will be the reason we no longer even speak the same language. It will drive me eventually to the topmost ridge of a nearby mountain range where the view is ruined on all sides by the fog, by the combined exhalations of all the myriad beasts lingering in the forests down below, fretting and fighting and calling out their wild arias in time to a barely perceptible pulse, one that is even now slowing down, threatening to cease.

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Entrails spill out in all directions, but they lack the colorful hues that serve to make most of us queasy. They are a dull bronze in color and seem solid, like something fallen from a plumber's truck. One is put almost immediately in mind of the sound of a viola, scratched out slowly and patiently by someone first learning his craft, or at least still of amateur status, and so not entirely sure in which direction he should be going despite the notation on the sheet of paper before him. The scrawling hand continues down the page without

obeying the niceties of parallel borders or beginning on the left hand side, and the longer you stare at it, the more jumbled and confusing it becomes, until at some point (say, an hour or two in), you realize you are no longer standing in one place, that the world is moving past you at such dizzying speed, you might be forgiven for believing that the world itself is the illusion, that it is nothing more really than another kind of sound, and so you can be forgiven too for shouting then at the top of your lungs in an attempt to annihilate it by forcing a collision between two mutually exclusive frequencies. The artist, keenly aware that we are watching him, studying his every movement, holds his paint brush up almost as if he wishes for us to examine the structure of his forearm, to come to the conclusion that it is the muscles and the tendons there responsible for the creation of whatever must appear next on the canvas.

What does appear is a mechanical entity almost identical in every regard to that which appeared before it in the upper left hand corner of the canvas, suggesting that he has only this one notably obscure thing to say and that he has been trying to say it now, more or less constantly, since he first burst onto the scene more than thirty years ago, since he first emerged nearly penniless and suffering from what must have been scurvy from the coastal jungles and the

villages there with names reminiscent of our favorite gourmet foods and our best poets long since lost to the mists of time and other more recent forms of neglect, like water damage and a growing functional illiteracy.

When the oblong, yet shape-shifting spot of sunlight (and its myriad attendant motes) reaches finally the bed, the woman lying there shifts as if she is made more than just a little uncomfortable by the sensation, as if it were downright painful like the rhythmic movements of barbed insect feet over the exposed skin of her leg, and we wait for a moment, holding our collective breath, anxious to see what is going to become of them now that we know no two people could possibly be more different, no two people (or cyborgs or puppets, for that matter) are less likely ever to form a domestic partnership, with all that it entails. The mail arriving punctually every day in the mailbox at the end of the driveway. The muffled sounds of children at their prayers or bemoaning injustices done by parents and the world itself, all of it escaping partially open windows like someone's dissatisfied ghost turned loose to wreak its vengeance on the streets or the prairie dotted, of course, this time of year, with blue flowers and the numberless dewy spiders that call the tops of them home.

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Little enough attention is paid to the lines that appear, as if by magic, over our heads, long stretches of what might be electrical wire or sloppy handwriting, who can be sure? Hushed tones predominate and our dreams become exercises in sepia, in speaking without opening the mouth and hunting with spears. The explanations proffered by those who arrive on the scene by helicopter and then outboard motor run the gamut from post-Freudian hydrodynamics to an insistence that the past is something so valuable it ought to be locked up in a cabinet and revisited every two or three months so as to make sure nothing has gone missing, nothing has been stolen and sold on the cognitive equivalent of a black market. I chafe at the suggestion, of course, because it smacks of desperation, like volunteering for a search party one has caused to come into existence in the first place through various nefarious acts and stupidities. It literally makes the skin on my forearms crawl so that it (my skin) becomes tighter than it otherwise might and causes a great deal of discomfort when I sit too close to the fire. My hosts, with small animal bones thrust mock-ceremonially through the septum (and clashing for all that with their otherwise immaculate tuxedos), notice and try for a while to look the other way, out of respect for my

autonomy, I suppose, or because something is making noise out there at the periphery of the light thrown by the fire. It is trampling the vegetation in a perfectly audible way, and their instincts can't help but be activated. Still, they remain seated, torn between two unfortunate spectacles that must seem equally preposterous, or at least equally capable of upsetting their hard-won equilibrium and tilting the whole edifice into ruins. The calendar with its allotted number of days and its tendency to divide up into units named after local wildlife. Wild boar and colorful reptiles. Hummingbirds that can't rest for even a minute lest their hearts stop beating and their bodies drift like neoprene snowflakes to the ground. The forests where all of this happens exist, according to the several, frequently mutually exclusive, accounts, to separate one group from another and thus encourage further metamorphosis until all are unrecognizable to all. Until the tongues drop syllables that no more resemble one another than do horseflies and overused rhetorical terms like synecdoche. I must object vigorously, though, to all such approximations when the will to do so rises up the length of my spine like mercury in a glass tube, and I fling my hands about above my head so wildly, some in attendance suspect I suffer neurological ailments such as those listed in the enormous manuals in

their doctors' offices, tomes illustrated with finely-detailed black and white renderings of the brain and ganglia, as well as sometimes extra spaces to be found between the edge of the letters and the binding where, I suppose, you are expected to jot down your notes or invent new and more challenging versions of those games that kept us occupied as children during the sermon, like tic-tac-toe and the completing of squares with our initials in them from an original ocean of points. Years and years later, sitting on a balcony and twisting my phantom hand in the sunlight, I think back on those days and the people who spent some of them in my immediate vicinity, and almost immediately, I fall asleep. I dream a little bit and wake refreshed, and the sun has set and the sounds of the city moving far away, and then once again closer, remind me that I have treatises to prepare about that very experience, and others more recent, and I have some very difficult decisions to make. I have, for instance, to figure out once and for all who I am going to send them to when they are finished and what sort of packaging will suffice.

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The questions remain only partially answered because no one in the room realizes you have asked them. Perhaps they



regard you the way we regard the presence of waterfowl at the edge of the lagoon. There is sound there and we might be able to repeat it if called upon to do so, but the energy required leaves the mouth dry and the head spinning. It makes the afternoon seem like something invented for the purpose of illustrating a difficult concept rather than the shell within which we are expected to move around and shake hands with both strangers and acquaintances alike. It's the same general shift in perception that haunts certain alcoholics when they have decided to forego their favorite habit and haunt instead the end of the pier or the poorly-refurbished corners of the shopping mall, their suddenly over-stimulated retinas providing information concerning the shadows and the light and the strange and frequently vicious creatures that seem to occupy that boundary – those with teeth like chisels and those whose coats remind one of the moss that grows at the base of deciduous trees. Always on the northern side, according to the Scout manuals we were expected to pour over just as soon as we received them, right around the age of twelve or thirteen. Sometimes they had color photos in them of people tying knots and sometime they had pen and ink illustrations in the margins – serpents wrapped suggestively around the lower torso of tattooed women; fallen leaves with the

letters of the Greek alphabet spelled out inside them by their veins. And while it's tempting to search for those who have preceded you, those who signed their names in the wet concrete or carved them into the hard bark of the trees, we realize after a great deal of experience with margins and the things which get notched into them before we have arrived, before, in some instances, we have even bothered to be born, to do so is simply to invite the sort of mistaken thinking about chronology that brought us to this point and no further in the first place. That stopped us forever in our tracks. And all around, people whistling the tune of some song we used to know in our poverty-stricken young adulthood, a tune associated with the films maybe we were lucky enough to see once a month on the weekends, with rabid dogs in them, say, or those remarkable individuals who could fly without the assistance of heavier-than-air aircraft or feathered wings sprouted painfully and miraculously from the human back, or even with the assistance of the imagination, which was bandied about then as the sort of thing one just could not live without -- like oxygen or detergent with the bleach already mixed in - - but which turns out, on closer inspection, to be a middling enough addition, an incompletely developed appendage wiggling about at the far edge of the body like an

invertebrate stranded in the rocks and the hot sun at low tide. This peculiar tale originates, as almost all of them do, in the mines of Wales or West Virginia and then circles the globe two or three times before settling down in our region to smolder and transform. To become something no one recognizes anymore and no one has the ability to understand except maybe one or two of the graduate students who are attempting to make their mark in the world of theoretical physics and finding their efforts for the most part futile. Our desires, after all, mold themselves to the grim circumstances of our lives rather than the other way around, and when the witnesses step forward, many years after the events in question, they get everything not exactly wrong, but not exactly right either. They offer a version that has mutated and lost its voice, that slinks around in the shadows like a muskrat that has somehow lost its water source and is therefore both terrified and thirsty. The laboratories nearby stay lit well into the early morning and you can see people moving about inside, some with the requisite white coats thrown causally over their shoulders and some with no coats on at all. Most of them sport very long hair (the kind that reaches to the lower back and reminds one of improvised rope ladders and daring escapes from castle towers in the fairy tales we

unfortunately no longer consume in the same quantities we did when we were children) and rumors begin to circulate almost immediately that something is going on in there that should, by rights, be going on out here instead, the way some people choose to make love with the lights on because it is, in fact, a means of making your partner see and know only that part of yourself that exists on the outside, that has been formed as improvised armor against an unremittingly hostile world, and therefore represents, at best, only about one-fifth of the actual person. Not that there is a great deal of complaining during or afterward, but the concept can gnaw once it has been discovered. It can make Tuesday, say, a very long day indeed, what with the payroll still unfinished and the pictures in the mind squabbling obscenely with the bland and incorporeal words that necessarily make up the concept itself, that flesh it out without, of course, placing any actual flesh on its skeleton. This is why sometimes you hear people sobbing audibly on the other side of a thin wall or the partition of a cubicle and you know you should probably stand up and go over there and say something to whoever is suffering in this blunted manner. You should offer some much needed words of comfort or advice, but you refrain through what must look to an outsider like simple cowardice. You keep typing or

having at the gums above your incisors with a toothpick. The appearance and the reality, then, work together in this instance to create a third, more proper option, one that unfortunately must remain without a name given that it is not an hallucination exactly, but it is not a normal way of experiencing the world either. It is an anomaly that keeps cropping up more and more frequently, so that eventually it is not going to be seen as an anomaly at all. We are going, therefore, to have to find a proper way of referring to it more succinctly, without just pointing a finger.

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The need to scrub blood from the fabric arises as if by accident, as if it had never been considered before by those who wander this stretch of river looking to remove old tires and the tin signs manufactured mostly at the prison some fifty miles away. It gets the tongues to wagging that have mostly remained still to that point, and the effect is very similar to that one would expect, I imagine, upon attending the symphony orchestra when one has never attended it before. But this is all just speculation when the events in question call for absolute facts, hard evidence such as we are tempted to compose poems about, poems with a very strict sense of meter and even a wealth of caesuras, found

in the middle of each mostly abominable line, all in an attempt to demonstrate beyond all question that we are quite serious in the endeavor (no matter the quality of the results) and wouldn't trade it even for something involving the roasting of a whole pig on a spit or the trekking up one side of a mountain and down again on the other. Something I have slight acquaintance with ever since returning from the southern hemisphere and finding that the air here is thick and unreasonable by comparison; it seems almost to insist on its own relevance, its own self-conscious manner of moving from one place to another and over all the obstacles in its path -- the birch trees with their enormous swaths of shed white bark littering the forest floor at their feet and the tugboats signaling to one another in the near total darkness at night by means of someone standing at the bow railing and playing the cornet or saxophone. Even the spotlights located on shore or on the bridge of another vessel plying its way un-melodically through this void sweep occasionally across the water like elongated ghosts as they are illustrated in the periodicals by artists who have never seen one, who barely even believe they exist. With time, our astonishment fades and the hard realities of bodily fluids and the patterns they make when released from their containers seem as old-hat as, say, the flight plans

submitted by the pilots of the jetliners that streak about nearly unseen in the frozen wastes above our heads, and we even learn to settle into what might pass for a species of comfort and acceptance if you don't examine too closely what we mutter under our breath -- the oaths and imprecations -- entire barren cosmologies rendered in a single phrase.

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Waiting in the corridors, behind the faux plant life and the shadows cast by statues, we have time to reflect on what our lives have become, mere shades and remnants, half a mouthful of consonants. The realization comes thundering down out of the sky and takes everything with it, clears a space wider than Manhattan. This is what they mean by toxic, by the care taken in laying out alternatives before they have had a chance to simmer. One has to wonder what the role of narrative is, then, in a universe without memory, without the past to inform it, if there is any role at all. Maybe it's like those grainy cinema images we have from the turn of the last century depicting Europeans moving about in a pre-determined, stylistic manner on the dance floor. Surely, such exercise meant something specific to them and we could, if we wish, un-bury the details, scoop

them up like handfuls of sand, but what would be the use? How would we apply that knowledge to our own movements, necessary as they are? How would we feel anything like the thrill of recognition? Small particles drift back in over the site and obscure the vision, but fail to clog the lungs to any significant degree. All that coughing must originate in something else, a mass delusion maybe of the sort that comes and goes through the eons like extinctions or feckless tectonic movements. I wake most mornings around four, the throbbing such that I forget for a moment what's missing and reach out for the bottle of ginger ale on the night stand or the empty space in the bed next to me that isn't always empty. At such moments, I wonder what it must feel like to have the end of someone else's patella, pushing its way through skin, jar you from dreams that might otherwise have played out in their entirety. Our curiosity doesn't usually last that long once we have reached an age where age itself becomes a difficulty not to be overcome but side-stepped, treated like just another irksome inquiry by a detective or a priest, someone with a job to do, certainly, but exhibiting no nuance, no subtlety in his approach. And, I ask you, why have that conversation in the first place when silence (or its near relative) is more soothing and accurate and less likely to find its climax in



knife play? Later, Eulalie sneaks in through the open window and carries with her a jar full of clear liquid, half consumed already and smelling of the hospital. When in this condition, she never slurs her words but they have a tendency to come out in the wrong order, to appear like once proud warriors routed now and engaged in a headlong retreat. I admire this side of her (so long as it appears only rarely), and I study it for a moment as if it were a single cell organism (a prokaryote, say, or a protozoan) in a rounded drop of pond water on its glass slide. She gets angry. She says I am always clamming up just when I ought to be reciting something lengthy and official, something almost patriotic, its ostensive purpose being to bring strangers together to accomplish important tasks like flying to Venus or eliminating kidney disease. The charge is unfair and she knows it. By way of apology, Eulalie sidles up next to me and runs her fingers through the hair at my temples, the sensation so small and yet so delicious at the same time, I half pray to be annihilated in that moment so as not to have to inhabit the void all ordinary (and even, for that matter, extraordinary) experience of necessity will become by comparison.

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The box might not have anything in it other than old receipts and bits of cellophane, but we need to find out for sure. Rumor and speculation have been circulating like the winter winds and when you stand in one place long enough you feel the burden; you sacrifice the majority of your life for a principle that doesn't really apply except in extraordinary circumstances, like when an animal has escaped from the circus, say, and is on the loose in your neighborhood or the skin on the end of your fingers begins to lose its tensile strength. It sags a bit and tingles and as a result you find even the simplest tasks nearly impossible to perform. No more lighting cigarettes. No more tapping strangers on the shoulder. Are the two related? Did the one cause the other or have they simply become associated by accident the way water has a habit of attracting ducks? The past seems to operate in precisely this same fashion, tossing up bits and pieces of itself haphazardly and all but daring us to leave them in that fragmentary condition, to accept what it has offered without embellishment or complaint. That we can't accept the challenge, that we feel the need to re-arrange and fill-in doesn't mean we are weak-willed, necessarily (or incompetent or stupid), but it doesn't bode well either for the time when the curtain will be drawn back and everything revealed in a stark climax

straight out of the novels of Jon D. MacDonald. And I know the reference means little to those unfortunate enough not to have known my father, a man so dour even the cypress trees would give him a nod on occasion, as if they recognized he was cut from the same cloth, so to speak, as if he had been inducted into that grand organization, but I can't help thinking maybe his overly conventional tastes in reading materials and his wide lapels were part of the problem. Maybe, for that matter, they were the entirety of it, elements such as one might overlook the first go around and fail to catalog thereafter, but vital for all that because they carried within themselves an otherworldly quality, a ghostly power that we simply don't recognize or acknowledge these mere forty years later because we have all been taught that physics is difficult and most of the most promising planets are terribly far away.

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The secretions, under close scrutiny, alter their composition, their viscosity, and cause us to hyperventilate, to swear oaths to deities that have either yet to be created or have disappeared from the face of the Earth a thousand years ago. They make me think of a time when I had forgotten the use of words and stood at the edge of some

greater plain but couldn't communicate it, of course, to those who might have been interested, except through mostly fruitless hand gestures and a patterned wheezing. Our desperate attempts at communion with realities, with states of being, other than those we find ourselves in at present suggests we have been raised improperly, with little discipline and less love, only a jar full of strawberries maybe left out on the kitchen table in the morning sunlight to compensate for an absence that drags itself out for years and then decades. The slight downward gradient of the floor there makes it very difficult to keep your feet properly under your body even when you recognize it is there by observing the movement of the pencils you lay on the table in preparation for writing the very long letters people used to write before the advent of the telephone and the airplane and the strobe light. If you take it upon yourself to renew the tradition, certainly you must expect heartache and outright neglect, a sandy place at your doorstep full of lizards and scorpions, all of it continuously trying to creep in. And if you don't expect it, if you march ahead oblivious as a night watchman at three a.m., then the reports about you are true. And the scandalous rumors and the slightly less scandalous speculation. I choose rather to empty every pocket, every corner where the dust, so to speak, can

gather and ruin your hat. Not, of course, in any literal sense (just have a look at the condition of my temples!) but in the sense of robbing every previous sensation and anecdote, every moment prior to those during which I composed this particular phrase of this particular sentence, of their agency, of their ability to influence even so much as the flight of a seagull over the shores of Lake Erie or the passage of one proton into, and then out of, the nucleus of an atom. Do I believe this will solve the problems originally created by the existence of secretions themselves, by the calumny heaped upon them subsequently for eons and generations? The answer is, at best, slippery and eel-like and out of tune with the tenor of the rest of this discourse, a misprint and misprision in what amounts to a nearly endless paeon or pamphlet or primal scream. It ought therefore to be overlooked, or better yet, outright demonized, relegated to the neighborhood of the familiar obscene.

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